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## Sexual Imageries in Meister Eckhart

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# **Sexual Imageries in Meister Eckhart**

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A thesis submitted to King's College, London

for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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## Abstract

This study about sexuality in Eckhart's works contains two major parts. The first division of the study (the first two chapters) treats sexuality, which is also to be understood as *body* from a *universalistic* perspective, while the latter part of this work (four chapters) deals with sexuality (as *soul*) from a *particularistic* or Eckhartian perspective.

Furthermore, the universalistic part of this study deals with sexuality from a historical, philosophical, biological, sociological, and psychological point of view, while the latter part focuses on sexuality as seen through the theological and metaphysical lenses of Eckhart. However, there is harmonisation between both models – the universalistic and the particularistic models of sexuality – and this is where Eckhart brings about a reconciliation or synthesis between, on one hand, the traditional model which is often conflicted or dualistic in itself, and on the other hand, his model, *stripped of*, or *detached* from its historical sexual *angst* is a model which no longer views sexuality as a deterrent, or an impediment in the path of the *soul* in *her* ascent towards the divine. Because of this, he offers us a dynamic, a relevant, a progressive and a systematically coherent sexual theology which shows the necessity, the efficacy, and the meritoriousness of sexual relations between the *soul* and the *divine*.

Furthermore, Eckhart's language of sexuality is really an allegory about the sacredness of human sexual relationships. He, also by his sexual doctrine, shows that there is essentially no divide between God and humans. That is to say, God's divinity is the *ratio* of humanity's existence, and this existence is mediated through imageries of birth and procreation. Moreover, these imageries mirror the nature of the Divine which is the *totum* of all that is animate and inanimate, visible and invisible.

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## Introduction

Mysteries<sup>1</sup> surround Eckhart, even his name is uncertain as there are various forms of it; plus, the location of his place of birth is open to dispute.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, some of the teachings, sermons and other writings ascribed to him are also open to disputation with regards to their authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Yet even those works which are judged to be genuine – and many of them were lost to scholarship for centuries<sup>4</sup> – when viewed by us through historical, theological, ecclesiastical, philosophical, political, psychological, linguistic, and mystical lenses often lead us no closer to apprehending the *real* Eckhart, if we can ever speak of a historical figure as somebody real. But despite the less than complete information that we have about the Meister, what literary works we do have from him, and what critical commentaries we have about him, will at the end of this study give us a more robust understanding of the man.

## Conceptual framework

In this study of Eckhart, I will position my work on two parallel conceptual tracks:

1. In the context of medieval or scholastic epistemology, which is in effect a historico-sociological approach where a search for God is essentially an excursion that is experientialised; such a search is theological, metaphysical, mystical, devotional, and

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Until a hundred and fifty years ago [early 19<sup>th</sup> Century] the name of Eckhart had remained clouded in suspicion and almost total mystery...’ See C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (1977). See also Oliver Davies’ account of the different names: He is called Elkhart, Eckhart, Eggert and in Latin, Aycardus, Equardus, Eycardus, Cf. *Meister Eckhart Mystical Theologian* (1981), 22.

<sup>2</sup> ‘As regards the name of our author ... the German designation Meister Eckhart, although there is perhaps no very good reason for which we should not call him Master Eckhart in English. The name is also spelt Ekehart .... Occasionally, for some reason, one finds him referred to as Johannes Eckhart, but there is absolutely no warrant for this; his full name was in fact Eckhart von Hochheim’. See also M.O.C. Walshe’s *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Preface ix-x (1987). Later however, Walshe adds: ‘Concerning the details of Eckhart’s life a considerable amount of information has been gradually accumulated by scholars. He was born, possibly of knightly stock, at Hochheim near Gotha ... about the year 1260, and the date of his death can be fixed between February 1327 and April 1328....’ Ibid. Introduction, xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. x.

<sup>4</sup> ‘...the condemnation of Eckhart’s views as heretical has fatal effect on his posthumous reputation. His chief two disciples, Suso and Tauler, kept his memory alive for a time, and the vast number of manuscripts (over 200) containing sermons and treatises attributed to him still attest to his fame; but the dead hand of the Church was nevertheless able to prevent his influence from spreading as much as it might otherwise have done. In the 15 and 17 centuries Cardinal Cusanus and the mystic Johann Scheffler, respectively studied his writings. However, Eckhart remained half-forgotten till the 19th century.’ Ibid. xxvii.



pietistical. It is a search which is conducted within a milieu of sexual ambivalence and distrust; where sex, lust, and desire are seen as inimical to spiritual progress. Within this historical and religious space, medieval religious practitioners felt that it was only through the good offices of the Church, by salvation, repentance, forgiveness, indulgences, suffering, objectifying the Other; and, by other ascetic practices that one could find God and obtain union with Him.

2. However in contrast to this experientialising and apophatic approach to union – almost a hit or miss approach, as observed by all the technical definitions or so-called ‘proofs’ of God, such as cosmological (causal principle); ontological (necessary existence); teleological (end or purpose); and moral (conscience) - I will fast-forward, and will demonstrate two things: Firstly, that Eckhart’s theology goes beyond theology; beyond metaphysics; that he in fact, uses post-modern linguistic techniques in interpreting *being*. That is, his language of the divine is an expression of the subconscious; that it is about *desire* for the Other. So from this psychoanalytic perspective, I will partly adopt a Lacanian schema to complement my theological, philosophical and phenomenological interpretation of Eckhart’s language about the soul’s relationship to the divine.

Now, one such methodology or system of thought that explains the relationship between religious experience and sex is the discipline of psychoanalysis. However, amongst the scholastic tools from the linguistic inventory that are used to show the connection between the erotic and the sacred, is the specific concept of ‘desire’. This desire on one hand is rooted in biology, or the libido drive, and functions to replicate the species; and, on the other hand, desire has a psychological basis which is mediated through linguistics.

So linguistics by way of psychoanalysis not only looks at language as words, but wants to know how these words function as signs or signifiers. Furthermore, as linguistics seeks to discover the real meaning behind speech and what speech signifies, it also seeks to explain, interpret, and even predict human behaviour. In resorting to psychoanalysis through the lenses of linguistics, we wish to move from the concrete to the abstract, from denotation to connotation, from object to subject, from the ‘I’ to the

‘Other’. So the many devices<sup>5</sup> of language that we will use include, but are not limited to metaphors, similes, signifiers, and the signified, counter-intuitive propositions, contrasts, oppositions, and so forth<sup>6</sup> to investigate, and to reveal real *being* or *existents*.

Secondly, I will show that not only does Eckhart use post-modernist ways of constructing his theology, but that in retrospect, his theology encapsulates in general, certain perspectives or theories which have, at least, from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present time, exercised the minds of the average person. But furthermore, these perspectives some of which have become respectable academic disciplines, have lent themselves to close scrutiny by theological, philosophical, scientific, etc. *savants*. Some of these perspectives are for instance, *Queer Theory* and *Queer Theology*; *Phenomenology*; *Feminist Theory* and *Feminist Theology*.

We will briefly look at each one of these concerns in the light of some of Meister Eckhart’s teachings. For instance, his theology can rightly be located in the academic discipline of *Queer Theory* or *Queer Theology*. What do we mean by Queer theory? Patrick S. Cheng characterises it thus:

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<sup>5</sup> Lacan *returning to Freud* includes other linguistic or rhetoric devices in this list that translate the narrative of the analysand. He includes: “Ellipsis and pleonasm, hyperbaton or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition – these are syntactical displacements; metaphor, catachresis, autonomasis, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche – these are the semantic condensations in which Freud teaches us to read the intentions – ostentatious or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory or seductive – out of which the subject modulates his oneiric discourse”. *Écrits*. pp. 63-64. (See footnote No. 6 below for definitions of some of these terms. I have given these because I shall be returning to some of these words later).

<sup>6</sup> **Definitions:** **Ellipsis:** The omission from a sentence or other construction of one or more words that would complete or clarify the construction. **Pleonasm:** The use of more words than are required to express an idea or redundancy. **Hyperbaton:** A rhetorical device in which the usual or expected word order is inverted. **Syllepsis:** When a single word is syntactically related to one or more words in a sentence, but their meaning must be understood differently in regards to these words. **Regression:** A defensive reaction to some unaccepted impulses. **Repetition:** A person repeats a traumatic event or its circumstances over and over again. **Apposition:** A relationship between two or more words or phrases in which the two units are grammatically parallel and have the same referent. **Metaphor:** A word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. **Catachresis:** The misapplication of a word or phrase, as the use of ‘suspicious’ to mean ‘auspicious’. **Autonomasis:** The use of a title instead of a name. **Metonymy:** The use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated. **Synecdoche:** A figure of speech in which a term for a part of something is used to refer to the whole of something or *vice versa*; for example, politicians as the government or the military as army. **Oneiric:** Relating to dreams or dreaming.

Queer theory challenges and disrupts the traditional notions that sexuality and gender identity are simply questions of scientific fact or that such concepts can be reduced to fixed binary categories such as “homosexual” vs. “heterosexual” or “female” vs. “male”. So queer theory refers to the erasing or deconstructing of boundaries with respect to these categories of sexuality and gender.<sup>7</sup>

Queer theology follows from queer theory, and citing Cheng again, he insightfully discloses that:

Queer theology begins with an assumption that gender non-conformity and gay and lesbian desire have always been present in human history, and were present in the Bible. It is a way of unravelling structures and stories that have been oppressive. It is also a way of understanding the Bible as a source of stories about radical love. (Op.cit.)

In addition, we see where Gerald Loughlin in his ‘Introduction: The End of Sex’ in a collection of essays called *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, in describing queer theology, says:

.... queer theology is...queer because it finds - like queer theory – that gay sexuality is not marginal to Christian thought and culture, but oddly central. It finds it to be disavowed but necessary condition for the Christian symbolic; and not simply as that which is rejected in order to sustain its opposite, but upfront on the surface of that opposite, playing in the movement of stories and images that constitutes the Christian imaginary...Queer seeks to outwit identify. It serves those who find themselves and others to be other than the characters prescribed by an identity. It marks not by defining, but by taking up a distance from what is perceived as the normative. The term is deployed in order to mark, and to make a difference, a divergence.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, we can make an argument for Eckhart to say that his theology displays aspects of *Phenomenology*. For example, when we examine Eckhart’s use of the term *desire*, say, for divine union, this desire is directed towards an object – namely some other (God). This desire is not without meaning or thought, for it is an *intentionality*, i.e. the subject who possesses the desire is *conscious of the consciousness* of something. That is to say, that the subject not only experiences the experience, but is also conscious of the experience. Therefore, the object of Eckhart’s desire becomes an *intentional* object.

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<sup>7</sup> *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, Seabury Books, N.Y. (2011), 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Introduction, Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, USA (2007), 7-9.

Now, this object may perhaps be perceived, fantasised, seen, tasted, smelt, or it might be signified; but, however this *intentionality* arises, the essential thing to note, according to the *phenomenological* perspective is that this *intentional* object is really an extension of ourselves. So there is no divide between the experience and the *experiencer*. This is more the Heideggerian approach to *Phenomenology* which departs from Cartesian dualism, where the Heideggerian model sees human beings as non-dualistic. This is Eckhart's position surely? For Homily 28 says:

*Ego*, the 'I', is proper to none but God in His oneness. *Vos*, this word means 'you', that you are one in unity, so that *ego* and *vos*, 'I' and 'you', stand for unity'.<sup>9</sup>

Here we see where the desire is one of intentionality with the object.

In line with this phenomenological perspective, where we are one with our experiences; that in fact, we are the sum total of our experiences, and our consciousness is situated in relationship to those experiences, Michel Henry (1922 -2002) a French philosopher of the phenomenological persuasion says:

The solidarity between the fascination exercised by the object and the intentionality which transcends itself toward it is evident. Doubtless, this object ... finds the condition for its possibility in the ambiguous *status* of the transcendent body of the ego, but this body becomes a sexual object properly so-called only when a specific intentionality is directed toward it ....<sup>10</sup>

In other words, what Henry wants to tell us is this:

That transcendence is 'within' and not within some pure Platonic or Cartesian soul, [we make even add here, and not in some anthropomorphic God or some similar being] but within the body as well. Consequently, the transcendent 'outside' is not the privileged *locus* of truth. So the human subject is absolutely indispensable to meaning and truth.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Eckhart's theology accommodates Feminist Theology. Consider this statement of his:

... The intention is always the man. But when nature is shifted or hindered so as not to operate with full power, the result is woman; and when nature ceases her

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<sup>9</sup> [Mod. German transl.] DW2 *Pr. 28 Ego elegi vos de mundo* <Joh.15,16>. "'Ego', das Wort 'Ich', ist niemandem eigen als Gott allein in seiner Einheit. 'Vos', dieses Wort bedeutet soviel wie 'Ihr', daß ihr eins seid in der Einheit, das heißt: Das Wort 'ego' und 'vos', 'Ich' und 'Ihr', das deutet auf die Einheit hin". Quint, *Ins.* 68-69, p. 651. See Walshe's *Meister Eckhart Sermons & Treatises*, vol.1, p.145.

<sup>10</sup> *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, transl. Girard Etzkorn, Publ. Martinus Nijhoff, Hague, (1975), Conclusion, 216.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* See back page cover.

operation, God begins to work and create, for without women, there would be no men.<sup>12</sup>

At first glance, Eckhart apparently brings us the bad news in that he seems to start with the patriarchal or phallocentric propositions as were customary modes of thinking before, during, and after his time. Yet, this position is still privileged in many hierarchical and patriarchal societies in today's world. Ontologically, Eckhart is right, in that the intention of nature is always to reproduce its own likeness; that is, *like begets like*. So this view is a biological or genetical recognition of objective facts. But there is also an instinctual and cultural desire for like to beget like. So for instance, a father wants to produce a son, and perhaps, a mother wants a son, if only because muscle mass seems to carry with it more social, labour or economic premiums.

Theologically too, God wants to create his own image – therefore he creates 'man' in his own image. However, where the old ontologies fall short is to view a woman (*wo-man*: the name implies half-man) as an incomplete man, who is produced, purely because nature is deficient or impeded.

Despite these faulty assumptions, Eckhart brings the good news, which ought to delight the disciples and supporters of feminist theology. For Eckhart now uprights the anthropology and the ontology by saying that, 'where nature ceases its operation, God begins to work and create, for without woman, there would be no men'.

This inescapable logical fact is hardly a revolutionary doctrine, yet patriarchy it seems, is unable and unwilling to recognize that without mothers, wives, daughters – women - men might as well be rocks. However, rocks do exist, and have functions; but, without women, men would not have a purpose for they would not exist. So cognitively and rationally, men can finally become homo-sapiens, if they take note of Eckhart's observation that:

All God works, He puts into the *one* that is like Himself. God gives equally to all things, though their works are unequal, yet they tend in their operation to reproduce themselves.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> DW2 *Pr.* 28 '... es ist dabei stets auf den Mann abgezielt. Nur, wo die Natur abgelenkt oder gehindert wird, so daß sie nicht volle Kraft in ihrem Wirken hat, da entsteht ein weibliches Wesen; wo aber die Natur von ihrem Werke abläßt, da hebt Gott zu wirken und zu schaffen an; denn wären nicht Frauen, so wären auch keine Männer'. Ibid. In. 64, p.650. See also Walshe, Ibid. 144.

What this means, is that there is no distinction in God – there is equality, yet difference. So for example a woman may not have men’s muscle mass, and in this sense, she might be *unequal*; but, she is equal, and often more than equal in commitment, love, caring, and brain-power. I think this is the message that Eckhart brings to embolden and dignify feminist theology.

Already, feminist theology is becoming a necessary and a desirable part of the Christian discourse about inclusion, and no longer is it seen as far-fetched and subversive. This is partly due to the current academic, intellectual underpinnings, and the moral suasions of scholars who happen to be feminist ones such as Tina Beattie. She in the Abstract to her book, *New Catholic Feminism, Theology and Theory*<sup>14</sup> urges that:

Roman Catholicism must go beyond its traditional anachronistic sexual stereotypes and hierarchies to present the Gospel in a way that is attentive to the questions, needs and values of the age, without surrendering the central truths of the Christian faith.

Now, a non-Roman Catholic or those who might not be favorably disposed to Roman Catholicism may justifiably ask: What are the truths of the Christian faith that Beattie speaks about here? We wondered about that ourselves. But Beattie gives a lyrical, poignant, and compelling account of what the Christian faith means:

‘Christianity’s uniqueness’ she says, ‘is its particularity and its identity derived from the drama it performs in the world – the drama of God incarnate who is carried in the womb of a virgin, who becomes the helpless infant at her breast, who eats, drinks, loves, and laughs with ordinary people; who is tortured and put to death because the world does not understand him; and, who gathers together all these incarnate human realities into a story of resurrection, reconciliation, and the hope of eternal life’.<sup>15</sup>

So based on the above rubrics, Eckhart’s theology is post-modern because through his radical restructuring of language, he not only goes beyond God, but as my Supervisor Markus Vinzent puts it:

Leaving God behind is [a] ‘famous motif’ [of his teachings] showing ‘the radicality of Eckhart’s message’.<sup>16</sup> What is this ‘isness’ that God is in himself?

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<sup>13</sup> DW2, Pr.28, ‘Alles, was Gott wirkt, das wirkt er in dem Einen als sich selbst gleich. Gott gibt allen Dingen gleich, und doch sind sie in ihren Werken gar ungleich; demungeachtet aber streben sie in ihren Werken nach dem, was ihrem eigenen Sein gleich ist’. Quint, p. 650. Walshe, Ibid. 143.

<sup>14</sup> *New Catholic Feminism, Introduction*, Routledge, Oxon, UK. (2006), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Introduction, p.7.

<sup>16</sup> H. S. Keel, *Meister Eckhart* (2007), 193.

Paradoxically... it is God's own 'atheism',<sup>17</sup> the moment when he is giving up himself. There is no theonomy in Eckhart,<sup>18</sup> no religious fundamentalism. On the contrary, atheism applies first and foremost to God himself as the one who is by his very nature detached from himself. God unclothes himself of God. Naked and bare he meets the soul.... Now that God no longer finds a place in himself and the soul has become equally nothing,<sup>19</sup> her nothingness is the empty temple into which God dwells, and God's penetration turns the soul's nothingness into something.<sup>20</sup>

## The divine through bodily language

We today, by critical reflection on Eckhart's teachings discover not only fresh, novel, and exciting ideas about his writings; but, we also notice that his language - as it has to do with the soul's path towards the divine - has profound, if hidden sexual themes within them. These themes are justly now being revealed through the lenses of post-modern structuralism.

We are enriched and enlivened by this method of analysis, for the sexual themes imbedded in Eckhart's theology are themes not totally dissimilar from our own sexual concerns, assuming that medieval peoples had similar sexual issues as us. We can assume that they did, if sexuality is defined as bodily awareness, and a search for the Divine through language that is both conscious and unconscious.

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<sup>17</sup> See G. Hanratty, *The Origin and Development of Mystical Atheism* (1988), 2-6, esp. 4 where he points to the importance of detachment in the formation of mystical atheism; J. D. Caputo, *Fundamental Themes* (1978), 211: 'Eckhart proposes a kind of mystical atheism in which God Himself will disappear, in which we will be rid of God'; B. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (2001), 145; D.F. Duclow, *Hermeneutics and Meister Eckhart* (1984), 40 (compares him to a Zen master); D. Turner, *Atheism, Apophaticism, and 'Différance'* (2002); A.M. Haas, *Christliche Aspekte des 'Gnothi Seauton'* (1981), 89. 91-3; we also have to retain that it was this feature that brought Eckhart's work back to the readers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where he was re-discovered as a source for criticism of religions and a promoter of a Christ-religion rather than a mediator-religion, before he then a few decades later became used by the Nationalsocialist ideologists, see I. Degenhardt, *Studien zum Wandel des Eckhartbildes* (1967), 250-61 (on Hermann Büttner), 261-76 (on 'Völkische Religionsgestaltung').

<sup>18</sup> Hence, O. Langer, *Sich lâzen, sîn selbes vernihten* (2000), 326 who only sees 'absolute theonomy' overlooks a central element of Eckhart's teaching.

<sup>19</sup> See Eckhart, *Pr.* 52 (DW II 500, 2-01, 1;).

<sup>20</sup> The Art of Detachment, *One being through love*, Texts and Studies I (Leuven, 2011).

We, like them being human, not only biologically, but also cognitively, search for meaning to life – what is the nature of existence? So many of us as sentient beings in our search for meaning, tend to express ourselves with religious signifiers; and, although these signs and signifiers may be couched in sacred, mythological, mystical and ecstatic language; nonetheless, this language, when dissected by the tools of psychoanalysis, often have at its roots sexual meanings which are never far from our unconscious. So, as I have already indicated, it is in this locus of post-structuralism that I seek to ground my study of *Sexual Imageries in Meister Eckhart*.



## Chapter One: Post-modernity of Eckhart's language

### 1.1 How does Eckhart's language about love differ from his medieval contemporaries?

Eckhart's language is post-modern because of its sexual inclusivity which accommodates a sexual dynamism that is not hampered by the Augustinian conundrum of *Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo*, nor is it circumscribed by Augustine's 'libido' explicated in terms of 'concupiscentia', which denotes sexual desire. For as Herman Westerink discloses:

...although both libido and concupiscence can also indicate a desire for power (*libido dominandi*), i.e. a desire for mastery and not to be submissive to others (including God). Libido thus indicates in this way all the sinful desires that fundamentally distort the natural inclination to the good".<sup>21</sup>

However, Eckhart's use of sexual imageries departs from the traditional ways of understanding sexuality. It is a reasonable assumption to make based on the available scholarly literature, that Eckhart shared a common conception of love with many of his medieval counterparts. To begin, this shared conception of love was in the form of courtly love:<sup>22</sup> (Chapter 2.4 of this work is devoted to courtly love), a love that was the genre of the troubadours of the Middle Ages. This love was supposed to be noble and chivalrous, and it was an expression of love for some other - someone of nobility. So a man of lower rank might have a fantasy for a noblewoman, and she, revelling in his fantasy, lets him pursue her in this make-believe love saga. Often such an affair ends in tragedy for both couples.

In courtly life, this love was idealised by a lesser for a greater. In religious life, the mystic, or someone else in an altered state of spiritual awareness or unawareness, expressed what was a kind of courtly love, as a yearning for the divine. But the expression of this love exhibited a tension between erotic desire and an amorous need

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<sup>21</sup> 'The roots of filiation: the church fathers' in *The Heart of Man's Destiny: Lacanian psychoanalysis and early Reformation thought*. Routledge, Hove, E. Sussex, UK. (2012), 14.

<sup>22</sup> 'It was Eckhart, the Dominican, who a century after [13th C.] when the *Minnesang* flourished most spectacularly took the vocabulary and used it once more for the expression of the relationship of God to man.... Eckhart never leaves us in doubt that this secular love vocabulary has now been restored to a theological purpose, but has, at the same time, lost none of the meanings that had accrued to it during its secular use'. See Kenneth Northcott, Preface, xiv in *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, Ed. McGinn *et al.* Paulist Press, NY. (1986).

for spiritual union with God. This tension between eros and amor was very pronounced or heightened for religious mystics, and other religious types. So, Eckhart understood the love idioms of his time, and how these idioms in terms of eros, amor, caritas, and dilectio when juxtaposed against bodily responses like lust, concupiscence, desire, and lack created *jouissance*.

Eckhart also recognised that love was a central topos in metaphysics, neo-Platonism, morality, ethics, and in redemptive, performative, and transformative actions. He believed like those before him, and like his contemporaries, that love for oneself, for one's neighbour, and for God was of central importance in human conduct. But love for Eckhart, unlike many other people's idea of love, had to be performed for love's sake - not for any ulterior motives. He knew about, and read many other sources of literature, including pagan and Christian about love; and, he knew about views on love as explicated by philosophers, poets, theologians, hagiographers, etc. He was acquainted with the seminal erotica-spiritual text in the Jewish-Christian Scriptural canon on love: the *Song of Songs*.

Many of his homilies especially his vernacular ones have love as their central themes. So from these openings remarks we see that Eckhart knew about the practices of love, and shared a corpus of love literature with his medieval compatriots. Specifically, the love to which we are referring, is a religious or spiritual love which is often termed amor/caritas or dilectio - i.e. love for God. This type of love based on religious ideas, that had the trappings of courtly love seemed to have been the chief type of love that mattered to medieval peoples whose lives were very much hedged around by the Church. This is a fair comment to make, for given the idealisation, the chivalrisation, and the patriarchialisation of courtly love; what came to be known many centuries later as romantic love; this type of romantic association was a conception and practice that seemed far removed, with only a few exceptions, from medieval peoples.

However, although Eckhart shared many of the same notions of love as his contemporaries, his characterisation or the working-out of love is uniquely different from theirs. For instance, although he was familiar with the socio-religio-economico-political ideologies and motivations of many of those in the Beguines and Beghards' movements, the love that these groups espoused was a religious love that had turned

inward on itself. It was a love that was based on the longing of the soul for an immediate, and a highly emotionalised, ecstaticised, and spiritualised rapture with God.

This type of interiorised or inward love-making with the divine was associated with the mystics, including those who called themselves or were given names like the Brides of Christ; this type of love was also embraced by other religious practitioners, who felt a 'presence' or an intuition of the divine. These groups included both genders - female and male. For instance, we are informed by Rabia Gregory in her PhD Thesis submittal that:

By the early thirteenth century, Bernard of Clairvaux's mystical innovation<sup>23</sup> would be embraced enthusiastically by gifted women mystics who not only described themselves as brides of Christ;<sup>24</sup> but, detailed their souls' turbulent romances with their heavenly Bridegroom...Women like Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg openly proclaimed themselves brides of Christ, and, though they lived chastely, neither probably participated in the monastic marriage ritual. In Book II of the *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, God's voice praises Mechthild and calls her a "bride of the Holy Trinity." Many of her poems and contemplations describe her love and longing for her beloved Bridegroom.<sup>25</sup>

However, although Eckhart was aware of the mystical traditions, and indeed, he is often characterised as a mystic himself (although some scholars doubt this appellation, because he was not known to indulge in visionary fantasies or to make any ecstatic utterances; maybe, the only ecstasy he knew, was to indulge in exuberant language in his sermons), and although he was in charge of several Beguinages and gave religious instructions to nuns, monks, lay-people and others; he did not exhibit that

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<sup>23</sup> [That is, casting the Bride in *Songs* as the Virgin Mary, whereas before in traditional interpretations of the Songs, the Bride was the Church. Bernard's mystical treatment of the Songs, now meant that through her mediation, every individual soul could enjoy that *unio mystica* experience. See Introduction xiv. M.O'C. Walshe's *Meister Eckhart Sermons & Treatises*, vol.1. Element Books, UK (1987)].

<sup>24</sup> "These brides of Christ wore wedding rings, bridal gowns, and bridal veils, either in their souls or on their bodies. They spoke to the Godhead as if he were their lover and visited with the Bridegroom in vineyards, palaces, wine cellars, and bedchambers, just as the bride in the Song of Songs had. Many of these medieval brides even married Christ, whether through a monastic initiation ceremony, or through a spiritual donning of bridal gown, crown, and wedding ring. By the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, every day sinners could, through religious conversion, marry Jesus and become the bride of Christ.

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, increasing numbers of women and men became brides of Christ, stepping into the role of the Shulamite woman and becoming living participants in a metaphoric enactment of Christ's transformative love". *Marrying Jesus: Brides and the Bridegroom in Medieval Women's Religious Literature*, Chapel Hill, 2007, pp.3-4.

<https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/indexablecontent?id=uuid:dbcaac3a-c91e...>

<sup>25</sup> Op.cit.

level of mystical exuberance to which better known and celebrated mystics were prone. Here is a brief sample as to how far his 'mysticism' goes:

Therefore I say that when we turn away from ourselves and from all created things, to that extent we are united and sanctified in the soul's spark, which is untouched by either space or time. This spark is opposed to all creatures and desires nothing but God, naked, just as he is in himself.<sup>26</sup>

However, if he were a mystic, he does not display the inward-centredness or the erotica-spiritual yearnings demonstrably seen in some of the other mystics. Eckhart has a more self-controlled rationalised neo-Platonic ontology. Of course, we know that Eckhart shared with others the apophatic tradition that was shaped by neo-Platonic thinkers like Plotinus *via* Proclus; that he was aware of the mystic tradition attributable to Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite (that Christian mystic who it is believed flourished around late 5th to early 6th century CE). However, Eckhart's apophatic engagement was not one of emotionality, but rather one where scholarship and reasoning informed his theology and modulated his interaction with the divine. For as Phillip Schaff says that although:

Eckhart was still bound in part by the scholastic method. His temper, however, differed widely from the temper of the Schoolmen. Anselm, Hugo of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura, who united the mystical with the scholastic element, were predominantly Schoolmen who were seeking to exhaust every supposable speculative problem. No purpose of this kind appears in Eckhart's writings. He is dominated by a desire not so much to reach the intellect as to reach the soul and to lead it into immediate fellowship with God.<sup>27</sup>

He practised a type of ontology, epistemology, and theology that reformulated the Neo-Platonic teachings into Christian idioms. His Christian God is also Absolute, and an Abstract Unity. His God is absolutely devoid of attributes which does not delimit Him. However, although this God was absolutely Unknowable, what we can deduce about Him (the pronoun 'Him' or 'He' is simply used because of linguistic convention) according to Eckhartian ontology, is that, He is ONE; and, that to know

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<sup>26</sup> 'Darum sage ich: Wenn sich der Mensch abkehrt von sich selbst und von allen geschaffenen Dingen, - so weit du das tust, so weit wirst du geeint und beseligt in dem Fünklein in der Seele, das weder Zeit noch Raum je berührte. Dieser Funke widersagt allen Kreaturen und will nichts als Gott unverhüllt, wie er in sich selbst ist'.

DW11, *Pr.* 48, Quint. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart (1971), p.713, lns. 419-420.

See transl. Oliver Davies, Meister Eckhart: *Selected Writings*, Penguin (1994), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Classics Ethereal Library, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. VI: The Middle Ages, AD.1294-1517. See [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc6.iii.v.iii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc6.iii.v.iii.html) [Accessed June 30, 2013].

Him was by a dialectic process of negation-affirmation. So God is neither this-nor-that; He is not either X or Y. But He is all these negatives and more. These propositions deconstruct language and make established patterns of language unstable and eliminate received certainties. However, following Eckhart's logic, the best we can hope for in apprehending this God is to have an intuitive awareness of Him, and to understand Him as utter Simplicity or Unity.

Remarkably, however Eckhart helps us to apprehend this Unknowable God, not necessarily by Will (not by moral obligations), but by Love. In fact, the conundrum about God's existence is solved or resolved by the aphorism *Deus est caritas*. Eckhart's love therefore, unlike his medieval contemporaries' construction of love, is that: love is not necessarily physical sensations or erotic yearnings although we often employ such physical and graphic descriptors to express this love for God. For as Graham Ward says:

I do not believe for example, that the Church Fathers and mystics who use the language of sexual intercourse to describe their relation to Christ are using such language metaphorically, as a symbolic resource ... I suggest [that] sexual union becomes a metaphorical act of the relation to Christ. Or rather, the erotic relation to Christ is the completion or perfection of what is most desired in sexual intimacy being an intimation of the divine relation that operates between God and human beings.<sup>28</sup>

That being the case then, Eckhart's love is an activity in, or of the soul, where contact is made between humanity and divinity. Furthermore, at this point of contact, the soul experiences the phenomena of simultaneous emanation and return signified by expressions like boiling/bubbling/swelling; outflowing/overflowing/ inflowing (*bullitio* and *ebullitio*<sup>29</sup>). *Bullitio* and *ebullitio* are dynamic and ever-happening phenomena which are akin to imageries to do with cooking, or volcanism, or

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<sup>28</sup> *Christ and Culture, On the Eros of the Ecclesial Body* (Blackwell, 2005), 108-109.

<sup>29</sup> 'vita quaedam, ae si imagineris rem ex se ipsa et in se ipsa intumescere et bullire in se ipsa necdum cointellecta ebullitione'. 'It is a form of life, as if you were to imagine something swelling up from inside and in itself and then inwardly boiling without "boiling over" yet understood'.

From: LW 1V, *Sermo XLIX*,3, *Imago* p.425, Ernst Benz, Bruno Decker und Joseph Koch, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart (1956), 425.

Cf. *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, Edit. Bernard McGinn: transl. Frank Tobin & Borgstadt, Paulist Press, NY. (1986), 236.

'Secundus gradus est quasi ebullitio sub ratione efficientis et in ordine finis, quo modo producit quid a se ipso, sed non de se ipso'. Ibid. p.426.

even to the generation of nuclear fusion in the core of the sun that produces energy and light.

Here is what Eckhart in his Commentary on Exodus' *Ego sum qui* (I AM WHO I AM) says about light: '... light that totally forces its whole being in light and into light and that is everywhere totally turned back and reflected upon itself...'.<sup>30</sup> This language sounds like the way physicists speak about how the sun produces light, thus:

Every second, fusion reactions convert about 700 million metric tons of hydrogen into helium within the Sun's energy-generating core. In doing so, about 5 million metric tons of this matter become energy. This energy leaves the Sun as radiation, and the part of this radiation that constitutes visible light is what makes the sunshine.<sup>31</sup>

Now, just as the sun has such a tremendous amount of mass, and is able to generate so much energy in its core by fusing hydrogen and helium to generate a nuclear furnace; and, just as the sun by suffusing this energy and light (unlike black holes which suffocate light) into the solar system; and just as the sun is able to generate and sustain all life; so too, the *I AM That I AM* is able by its own internal combustible material, generate energy and light to sustain all creation. So Eckhart here, although he probably had not thought about the relationship between energy and mass (that was left to Einstein at the beginning of the twentieth-century to *fill in the gaps* with his equation  $E=mc^2$ ); Eckhart's statement about 'light that totally forces its whole being in light ...' not only foreshadows modern physics, but he intuitively grasped the notion of quantum mechanics. So along with all the other titles that have been ascribed to Eckhart, it might not be far-fetched to say that, he was also a theoretical physicist.

However, perhaps more pertinently, the *bullitio* and *ebullitio* expressions represent more of the biological processes of gestation and parturition.<sup>32</sup> Such processes however are not physical ones, but ontological ones which are mediated through the

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"The second stage is like the "boiling over" in the manner of an efficient cause and with a view toward an end by which something produces something else that is from itself, but not out of itself". Ibid. p.237.

<sup>30</sup> 'et lux in luce et in lucem se toto se totum penetransl., et se toto super se totum conversum et reflexum undique...'. See LW11, Expositio libri Exodi, *Ego sum qui*, Cap. 3 .V. 14a, 16 pp. 21,22. Heribert Fisher *et al.*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart (1992). See McGinn *et al.*, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, Paulist Press, NY. (1986), 46.

<sup>31</sup> *The Sun as a Nuclear Reactor*: <http://library.thinkquest.org/C001124/gather/ssun.html> [accessed 23 June 2013].

<sup>32</sup> '.... It further indicates a "boiling" or giving birth to itself ...'. (adhuc autem quandam bullitionem sive parturitionem sui). Op.cit.

Intellect - the Logos - which is God, the Other. So based on these observations, Eckhart's conception of love is far in advance of his scholastic and medieval contemporaries. Why? Because his love is not an excitable, fleeting, capricious, unpredictable, and emotional human state of desire; but, Eckhart's love is immutable, pure and free – without a *Why*. His love even transcends the Platonic Ideal-Form. Eckhart's love is of a *loving* God.<sup>33</sup>

Eckhart no doubt knew the mystics, not necessarily personally, but certainly knew about their lives and writings; and it is believed by some scholars that he was probably influenced by some of their discourses, e.g. Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Some of Bernard McGinn's writings for instance, link Eckhart to important Beguine mystics like Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete.<sup>34</sup>

Eckhart instructed women and men in spiritual matters. His vernacular theology in which he delivered his German homilies, in the same way that the theologies promulgated by the Patristics, Carolingians, Monastics, and the Scholastics<sup>35</sup> (systems/methods of Christian discourses and practices) admonished people to love God; so, too did Eckhart's homilies instruct people to love God.

However, Eckhart's vernacular sermons on love have a common touch about them, unlike many of those sermons, discussions, abstruse theological, philosophical, logical arguments, and technical descriptions about God delivered by the scholastics in their academies that did not. Likewise, unlike many of the devotional and spiritual exercises performed in many a monastery; unlike ascetic practices that were intended as penance and purgation for one's failings and unworthiness; Eckhart's sermons in

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<sup>33</sup> 'God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God'. (1 John 4:16). DW III *Pr.* 65, 'Got ist diu minne, und der in der mine wonet, der wonet in gote und got in im'. Josef Quint (1976), 95/1. See transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 49.

<sup>34</sup> See McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, The Continuum Press, N.Y. 1994.

<sup>35</sup> The patristic period includes e.g., the early Christian writers/apologists, e.g. Clement and Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and John Cassian; Augustine and Cyril of Alexandria, Boethius, Cassiodorus and Gregory the Great.

The Carolingian period includes e.g., St. Isidore of Seville and Venerable Bede.

The monastic period includes e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux, William St. Thierry, Peter Abelard, Hugh St. Victor/Richard St. Victor and Peter Lombard.

The scholastic period includes e.g., Albertus Magnus, Saint Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

contrasts to these types of instructions, were less conventional, enigmatic; and, for better or worse were hard to ignore.

He challenged his hearers/listeners to be active. He exhorted his audience to be like Martha of the Lucan account. Eckhart uses her as an exemplar of engagement in this world. Certainly, he himself was no *Aycardus otiosus* or *Equardus absconditus*. Many of his listeners either, did not absent themselves from the world to become hermits enduring and enjoying *purifying* pain; doing penance which they believed would purchase them a bigger reward in the here-after, as many believed during Patristic times, which belief led many of them to become *ερημικός* and thus to live a life of eremitism, as some still lived during the Middle Ages.

Now, although Eckhart's language is often idiosyncratic, sometimes polemic, and exaggerated at times - this led to the condemnation of some of his teachings (no doubt because of envy) towards the end of his life by the Papal Bull *In Agro Dominico* (In the Lord's Field). Despite his parabolic statements which indeed were often misunderstood, his teachings about love were no doubt inspirational and thought-provoking. Here is an example of what he says about love: 'For a person who loves God, it would be just as easy [for that person] to give up the whole world as it would be to give up an egg'.<sup>36</sup>

Because Eckhart's language was so different from his contemporaries' language, it is no wonder then that he is known as the 'Father of German Thought'. Why so? Well, I will briefly summarize and list three reasons that Oliver Davies gives:

1. In Eckhart, we have record of a substantial use of the German language for preaching and intellectual discourse, whereas before this innovation, much of European intellectual life was conducted in Latin. He, therefore becomes the father of a distinguished German philosophical and theological tradition which extends to the present day....

2. The primacy of the intellect and human mind which is so characteristic of Eckhart and the German Dominican school anticipates nineteenth-century German

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<sup>36</sup>[Mod. German] 'Einem Menschen, der Gott liebt, dem wäre es ebenso leicht, diese ganze Welt hinzugeben wie ein Ei'.

DW11 *Pr. 30 Praedica verbum* (2 Tim. 4,2 u. 5), lns. 105-106, p. 658, Quint, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, (1971-1988).



Idealism, and Eckhart's recourse to the rhetorical resources of language in order to communicate his ideas is reminiscent of German thinkers in the modern period such as Friedrich Nietzsche or Martin Heidegger.

3. Eckhart seems also to be largely free of the weight of theological language and thus able to present classical religious themes in a way that is both fresh and challenging.<sup>37</sup>

## 1.2 Eckhart's inclusiveness

For instance, in his *Die deutschen Werke*, homilies 20(a) and 20(b), titled *Homo Quidam Fecit Cenam Magnam ...* (Luke 14:16), Eckhart tells about a certain man who had a feast and had invited many guests to his banquet; but, many of the invitees declined this nobleman's invitation with all manner of excuses. Some said that they had business to attend to; one of them said he had just got married and could not come. Eckhart tells us that these people who for whatever reasons turned down the man's invitation are burdened down with the cares of this world - they are *attached* instead of being *detached*.

Now, this man's Feast is analogous to the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. This Feast thus represents the mystery of grace, and in a symbolic sense it represents becoming the *Other*. Eckhart further discloses to us that during that dinner, God gives Himself, all that He is in the supper as food to His dear friends. They eat the food and become one with Him, just as the natural food that we eat becomes one with us.

In addition, this man who makes the feast, is given no name, but he is equated with God; and, so here the apophatic doctrine is again enunciated, and he, Eckhart quoting Dionysius, says: 'All who wish to declare God are wrong for they do not declare Him. Those who do not try to declare Him are right, for no word can declare God; yet he declares Himself in Himself'.<sup>38</sup>

Remarkably, Eckhart draws our attention a sexual theme here in the Feast by using the analogy of the soul. The soul, the intellectual part of it, is a man. This part as

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<sup>37</sup> *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings*, Introduction xxxvi-xxxvii., Penguin, (1994).

<sup>38</sup> 'Dar umbe spricht Dionysius: alle, die got sprechen wellent, die hânt unreht, wan sie ensprechent sîn niht. Die in niht sprechen enwellent, die hânt reht, wan kein wort enmac got gesprechen, mêr: er spricht sich wol selber in im selben'. MHG text: DW 1, *Predigt* 20(b) Quint p.347 [para.1]. See M.O'C Walshe's *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol.1. Element Books, Dorset, UK. (1987), 243.

it looks up, turns to (*into*) God. However, the soul when it turns downwards becomes a woman. With a single thought and a single downward glance she (who is male when looking towards God) now becomes a woman. For he puts on woman's dress (traditionally, it was forbidden for a man to wear women's clothes and *vice versa*<sup>39</sup>). The soul which has lost its masculinity (although it is feminine) cannot come to the feast.<sup>40</sup>

Here, in these seemingly odd statements is a remodelling of the language. Here there is a play on words, and the use of some of those linguistic devices that psychoanalysis employs, e.g. hyperbaton, apposition, etc. (See footnote 6 of definitions above). What we have here in these statements is not misogynistic language; no, it does not disrespect women, nor at the same time lionises men; but, the language represents an interchange of male/female roles; the blurring of roles; actually, a subverting of the male-female dichotomy. There is both a female and male side to our personalities - to our unconscious.

Eckhart is implying that there is an equality of identity between the genders. Essentially though, the language speaks about the soul, that if it lacks intellect, she cannot come to the Feast; for God is intellect, and because like attracts like, the soul (correspondingly feminine and masculine, and simultaneously looking up and looking down); that, in order to enjoy God's food (i.e. Himself) has to be a part of God and become God.

Homilies 20(a) and 20(b) explicitly show the *homo-divinus* nature of the soul. This is shown when Eckhart poses the question: 'Who prepared this feast? A man: the man who is God'. (*Wer hât bereitet dise wirtschaft? Ein mensche: der mensche, der dâ*

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<sup>39</sup> 'Nû was verboten in der alten ê, daz kein man vrouwenkleit an sich legete, noch vrouwen manneskleit'. Quint, 337:14-16. See Walshe vol.1, 239.

<sup>40</sup> [Mod. Ger. transl.]: 'Die Seele ist ganz und gar Mann, wenn sie Gott zugekehrt ist. Wenn die Seele sich abwärts wendet, dann heißt sie Frau; wenn man jedoch Gott in sich selbst erkennt und Gott daheim sucht, dann ist die Seele der Mann. Nun war es im alten Bund verboten, daß ein Mann Frauenkleidung anlegte oder Frauen Männerkleidung. Dann ist die Seele Mann, wenn sie ohne Vermittlung einfältig in Gott dringt. Wenn sie aber irgend wie nach draußen lugt, dann ist sie Frau'. DW 1, *Predigt* 20(a), *Homo quidam fecit cenam magnam*, (Luc. 14,16). Quint p.507 [para.3]. See Walshe, vol.1. 239.

got ist).<sup>41</sup> Also in homily 20(b) the God/man link is shown: 'Therefore St. Luke says, "A man had made a great feast". Eckhart adds, 'That man is God and has no name'.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the divine status of man, and the human status of God referenced by the cross-dressing illustration; this, is an interesting object lesson on sexuality and gender. Now, this type of activity traditionally, and still in our time is considered 'queer' in the socially disapproving sense of the word; and, as Eckhart points out, it 'was forbidden in the old law', but now he implies that there is no longer any prohibition against this mode of dress; there is no guilt associated with this type of *transvestism*.

Clearly then, Eckhart's theology is very accommodating. Now, this accommodation and inclusiveness of Eckhart's language indeed conforms to the post-modern way of thinking that uses this new linguistic pedagogy and lexicography to de-construct, reformulate, and upgrade outmoded ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

So on one hand, in the context of our two-fold conceptual framework enunciated above:

1. A historico-sociological approach where a search for God, a search which is often conducted within a milieu of sexual ambivalence and distrust; where sex, lust, and desire are seen as inimical to spiritual progress; a search that objectifies the Other; and, tries to find God by ascetic practices which can often become a sado-masochistic and fruitless enterprise; and,

2. In the context where Eckhart's theology now goes beyond theology; where, his language is an expression of the divine, where both it and the language reside in our subconscious; where this language is about desire for the Other; then, we can say that Eckhart's theology is *queer*, for it 'unravels structures and stories that have been oppressive. It is also a way of understanding the Bible as a source of stories about radical love'. (Cheng, op.cit.)

This radical love is displayed in those two homilies that we have hinted at above; for, in them we see that the man who gave the party, whom when his favoured guests (no doubt those who belonged to the *status quo* - the patriarchy) had turned him down; he now resorted to the egalitarian attempt of inviting all-comers. He told his

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<sup>41</sup> DW1, *Pr.* 20(a), Quint, pp.330-331, 5:5-6. See Walshe, vol.1. p.237.

<sup>42</sup> DW1, *Pr.* 20(b), 'Dar umbe sprichet sant Lucas: 'ein mensche hât gemachet eine grôze âbentwirtschaft'. Der mensche ist got und enhât niht namen'. Quint, p.352, 5:1-2. See Walshe, vol.1, p.246.

servants to 'go forth into the narrow and wide roads', and that whatever condition they found people, and whatever their identity - unfree, powerless, dispossessed, disavowed, sexual-and-gender-nonconformists; and even those who were heterosexual conformists, but who were struggling with their sexuality - that these people were not to be disenfranchised; but, that all those who were included in the roll-call of 'the poor and the blind and the lame and the feeble. These [were] to come to the feast and no one else'.<sup>43</sup>

Here then is a radical doctrine of inclusion, non-discrimination and loving without a 'Why'. Indeed, this man is *queer*, and as Loughlin asserted: '... And so God is radically fluid in his/her "gender", and both men and women can represent the divine life. (Indeed, perhaps transgender people will most perfectly figure this fluidity for us). This is a queer God indeed'.<sup>44</sup>

Although some – if only few – scholars have studied Eckhart's language and imageries,<sup>45</sup> rarely has the topic of sexual imageries and the metaphors of love attracted the attention of academics. However, very recently Charlotte Radler unearthed a few of the reasons for such a neglect:

'The tendency in contemporary scholarship', she writes, 'to gloss over the role of love in Eckhart's mysticism places it on the fringes of his thought and constructs a sharp dichotomy between love and intellect/being. Such a methodological approach, indicative of a wider current within scholarship on mysticism, reads a facile divide into Eckhart's mystical theology that is absent from his own writings. This categorization of Eckhart's mysticism as one-sidedly speculative is often funded by reductive assumptions about the nature of the Neo-platonic mystical heritage, Dominican mysticism, "heretical" mystical theology, and the interrelationship between the metaphors of love, being, and knowledge. Eckhart's mysticism is frequently contrasted with – and seen as a reaction against – the supposedly excessive and anti-intellectual affectivity, eroticism, and emotionalism of women's mysticism'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'Nû gât umbe die ziune und in die, wîten strâzen. Ein teil der krefte der sêle sint beziunet in den ougen und in den'. andern sinnen. Die andern krefte sint vrî, die sint ungebunden und ungehindert von dem lîbe. Dise ladet alle in, und ladet die armen und die blinden und die lammen und die kranken. Dise kornent in ze der wirtschafft und nieman anders. DW1, *Pr.* 20(b), Quint, p. 352 [para. 1]. See Walshe's transl.vol.1, p. 245.

<sup>44</sup> Queer orthodoxy, in 'Introduction: The End of Sex' in a collection of essays called *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, 27.

<sup>45</sup> See also J. Quint, 'Die Sprache Meister Eckeharts als Ausdruck seiner mystischen Geisteswelt' (1928); id., 'Mystik und Sprache' (1953).

<sup>46</sup> C. Radler, *In love I am more God* (2010), 172.

There have of course been attempts by some scholars to hint at Eckhart's use of the everyday or commonplace language of eroticism or sexuality as metaphors to communicate a unique relationship between him and the divine. Dorothee Sölle, for instance, in her book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*,<sup>47</sup> has shown how that language, although, often inadequate because of its apophatic limitations (that is, the language cannot penetrate the fog of the 'Cloud of Unknowing'<sup>48</sup>), has been used by Meister Eckhart, when he spoke about *Sunder Warumbe* (Without a Why or Wherefore) as an 'indispensable expression of mystical existence'. What Sölle means by *mystical existence* is explained by her when she makes reference to one of Eckhart's statements which says:

But the person who seeks for God without a way will find Him, as He is, in Himself; and such a son lives with the Son and He is life itself ... The reason for this is that life is lived for its own sake and emanates from its own sources; hence it is lived entirely without whys or wherefores, because it lives for itself.<sup>49</sup>

Sölle's notion of mystical experience in Eckhart means that one's love for God should be pure, without any personal ambitions and without self-motives. That this love has to be about total abandonment – even paradoxically, being 'rid of God himself'. This love has to be a 'letting-go', a 'stripping-off'. It has to be free from ego and it is without images. It is so pure that this love is as 'nothing'. This love is as pure and untouched as one were pure and untouched before one ever existed – that is, just as one was pure nothingness and simply existed purely in the *Ground* before one's physical birth, so should one love God, and even one's neighbour in all purity and with all justice: that in whatever one does or does not do, one's motives should be motiveless.<sup>50</sup> This type of love, then, is characterized as without a 'reason' or without a 'why' in as much as 'a rose has ceased to bloom without a why, or because she blooms' according to Sölle.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> (2001), 59-60.

<sup>48</sup> Sölle suggests that this language of ineffability seems to have its antecedent in Dionysius the Areopagite, possibly a monk who lived in Syria around the 6th and 7th centuries CE, but this ineffability or apophatic meditation became a classic of Western mystical tradition when it was given added prominence by, it is believed, an unknown 14th century English priest who may have been a Carthusian monk. (Ibid. 57).

<sup>49</sup> [Modern Gr. transl.] DW1 Pr.5(b) *In hoc apparuit caritas* ... (1 Joh.4: 9), Josef Quint (1958-1960), 450-451.

<sup>50</sup> See also DW II Pr. 52, *Beati Pauperes Spiritu*, J. Quint (1971-1986), 486-506.

<sup>51</sup> D. Sölle, *The Silent Cry* (2001), 59-60.

Furthermore, the mystical experience expressed by language although physical, erotic, and sexualised is analogous to the range of feelings experienced between the mystic and the divine. As evidence of this mystical experience using physical or erotical metaphors, Robert Winston, a fertility expert, and one of the leading pioneers of the *invitro fertilization* technique, in his highly acclaimed and informative book, *The Story of God* says:

... sexual arousal is partly unconscious, and correspondingly impossible to render in words. Across the world, religious mystics describing their moments of union with God have also found it hard to explain themselves in terms that ordinary folk can understand. Often they are driven to use quite startling metaphors to describe their religious or spiritual feelings.<sup>52</sup>

A couple examples that we can cite to support this view are the following ones: St. Mechthild of Madgeburg (c.1210-1297) in her Treatise *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* says:

This is what the Bride of God, who has rested in the locked treasure chamber of the complete Holy Trinity says: ‘Ah, get up and go away from me, all you creatures! You’re hurting me and you can’t console me’. The creatures ask: ‘Why?’ The Bride says: ‘My love has slipped away from me while I slept, resting in union with Him’.<sup>53</sup>

Likewise, St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) in her book *Interior Castle* (or *The Mansions*) speaking about union or ‘spiritual marriage’ says:

... she [the soul] complains in words of love ...to her Spouse, knowing Him to be present, but not willing to manifest Himself. This is a great but pleasant affliction; and if she desired not to have it, she cannot, nor does she ever wish it to leave her, for it [the affliction] gives her more delight than the suspension of the Prayer of Quiet which has no such affliction attached to it.<sup>54</sup>

It must be however noted that although the desire of both mystics is spiritual, the imageries that convey the intensity of the passion are physically very palpable.

Winston further draws on studies by Andrew Newberg, the Director of Clinical Nuclear Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania to describe the relationship between religious language and sex. Winston concurring with Newberg says:

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<sup>52</sup> Bantam Books, London (2005), 113-115.

<sup>53</sup> Book IV,12 transl. Elizabeth A. Andersen. Publ. Boydell and Brewer, Suffolk, UK. (2003),74-75.

<sup>54</sup> *Sixth Mansions*: transl. John Dalton, www.saintsbooks.net, London (1852), Cp. 11:102-103:3.

“Visionaries talk of bliss, exaltation, rapture, ecstasy, of loss of self in the other: all these terms we use when talking of love and sex”.<sup>55</sup>

So if Winston and Newberg are correct about ‘sexual arousal being partly unconscious, and correspondingly impossible to render in words’, then we will have to look to other mechanisms or tools to explain how such sexual metaphors are often used to describe religious and mystical experiences. Now, one such methodology or system of thought that explains the relationship between religious experience and sex is the discipline of psychoanalysis.

Essentially then, psychoanalysis deconstructs language so as to arrive at its nucleus in as much as physicists break open the atom which at one time was thought to be the smallest indivisible piece of matter. But they were eventually to discover in time by the use of the right tools – e.g., the electron microscope and particle accelerators - and other sophisticated equipment, that within the nucleus of the atom were numerous other sub-atomic particles, and waves, some of which they gave strange Greek-sounding names, like, hadrons, quarks, baryons, mesons, pions, etc.<sup>56</sup> and further complicating the interstices of fundamental matter, there were found accompanying these particles, their opposites or anti-particles.

So when we speak about the phenomenon of sexual-religious liaison, we are not here particularly interested in sexuality as a physical, biological, mechanical or reproductive behaviour; but, we are concerned to investigate the meaning of the sexual/mystical experience. We are not even interested in the basic building blocks of grammar such as morphemes, phonemes, graphemes, syntax, sentence structure, and so forth; but, rather we are interested in the implied or hidden meanings behind utterances. Thus we will be using psychoanalytical tools and looking through the lenses of phenomenology to explain *being qua being*.

We are not even talking about metaphysics *per se*, but in fact, we are de-metaphysising or de-mythologising metaphysics, and are using instead a bundle of psychoanalytic or quasi-scientific tools clinically, but also artistically to understand the human *genome* code of language, or human communication as mediated by language.

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<sup>55</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> C.f. Robert Winston’s, *The Story of God*, p.392.

So then, psychoanalysis or more specifically, phenomenology in seeking to explain the constituents of experience – what are the meanings of experience - in attempting for instance, to explain the eroticised mystical experience; phenomenology will most likely theorize that the intentionality, and the intersubjectivity of the mystical experience expressed by such striking sexual metaphors, are the embodiment of desire which is given theological saliency and expressed as *caritas*. But fundamentally, the language of eroticism which has now become transcendently immanent, represents a breakthrough or *breakout*, where *unknowing* becomes *knowing*; and, where finally, even if only sometimes fleetingly, humanity becomes apotheosised, and theophany becomes anthropologised.

A few other scholars since Eckhart using the psycho-analytic methodology (although Eckhart was unlikely to call it that, for psychoanalysis is traceable to Freud) to examine erotica-spiritual discourse, those few scholars who have looked at sexual imageries have shown that a very close resemblance exists between the language of the profane and the sacred, between eros and *caritas*; and, some of these scholars again have attempted to show the relationship between sexuality and spirituality.

The already mentioned Charlotte Radler uses Eckhart's Sermon 5(a) which asserts that 'those who love God become God'.<sup>57</sup> She points out the 'polyvalent dimensions of love' in Eckhart who 'employs a variety of terms, principally *amor*, *dilectio*, and *caritas* in his Latin writings and *mine* and *liebe* in his Middle High German texts' contending 'that the multivalent signifier of love lies at the heart of Eckhart's mysticism and constitutes a central topos that discloses the substance of his mystical theology'.<sup>58</sup>

In going beyond a strict study of terminology, Radler highlights how the study of love in Eckhart's language reveals the master's 'fluid construction of reality' that 'underlies a complex performance of attribution that critiques particularizing referential language, overcomes the binary structures of analogy, and rejects the privileging of any particular signifier'.<sup>59</sup> In mentioning metaphors like the eye, the hunting, the mutual *perichoresis*, i.e. the triune relationship between each person of the Godhead, e.g., co-

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<sup>57</sup> C. Radler, *In love I am more God* (2010).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 174, 171.

<sup>59</sup> C. Radler, *In love I am more God* (2010), 179-180.



indwelling, co-inhering, and mutual interpenetration; the nuptial chamber, the wings of Seraphim, only to mention a few, she opens up the field that is being studied in the present monograph, 'a vibrant site' in Eckhart where 'ecstatic love' is being portrayed 'as an authentic love that lacks a why'.<sup>60</sup>

Denys Turner, in contrast, has some strong misgivings or objections as to the *experientialized* Eckhart: For he says: 'When I had read any of the Christian writers who were said to be mystics, I found that many of them – like Eckhart or the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* – made no mention at all of any such experiences'.<sup>61</sup> Hence, he sees Eckhart's language as intellectual, almost post-modern plays with ambiguities rather than reflections of his underlying ontology, as expressed by Radler. It comes as no surprise therefore, that he does not mention sexual imageries at all. For instance, Turner says:

When, therefore, we note the obvious, but otherwise incidental fact of the extreme negativity of Eckhart's theological language – saturated as it is with images of "nothingnesses" and "abysses", by the featurelessness of "deserts" and "ground", and by "nakedness" and "emptiness" – we can begin to see that the rhetorical devices have a central theological point.<sup>62</sup>

The theological point, however, is seen in Eckhart's *negativity*, reflected in how he uses linguistic tools to deconstruct language rather than construct sensual visions. According to Turner, Eckhart's language is characterised by 'its rhetorical self-consciousness, its strained and strenuous, hyperactively paradoxical extravagance – its apophasis by excess. The language, naturally, bursts at the seams under the pressure of the excessive forces it is being made to contain, the language as body bursts open under the pressure of its overloaded weight of significance'.<sup>63</sup>

Turner's language itself is hyperbolic, and his views about Eckhart's language are also *overblown*, but he somehow believes that Eckhart's *hyperactive* language has a meaningful theological purpose, and he utilizes a statement from one of Eckhart's sermons to demonstrate Eckhart's theological aim:

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 188-189.

<sup>61</sup> D. Turner, *The Darkness of God* (1995).

<sup>62</sup> D. Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (2004), 100.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 102.

... Therefore your soul must be unspiritual, free of all spirit, and must remain spiritless; for if you love God as he is God, as he is spirit, as he is person and as he is image – all this must go! ‘Then how should I love him?’ You should love him as he is nonGod, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is pure, unmixed, bright ‘One’, separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of ‘something’ into ‘nothing’.<sup>64</sup>

Turner places undue emphasis on Eckhart’s remarks which he sees as linguistic hyperboles rather than metaphors about a mystical or a transcendent relationship – about oneness, and union – between the soul and the divine. However, to Turner’s credit, he belatedly comes to realize the importance of Eckhart’s inversion or subversion of sensual language when he admits:

As an account of how human reason – our animality – can in some sort speak God, this is also pure Thomas, just as, when Eckhart preached in Strasbourg that we “should love God as he is nonGod”, he said nothing that Thomas had not already written in his study in Paris when he tells us that “by grace ... we are made one [with God]”<sup>\*</sup> as to something unknown to us.<sup>65</sup>

The connection between Eckhart’s metaphysical language and sexuality or *vice versa* is academically approved – the reference to Thomas – and linguistically coherent, and is not marginalized. My supervisor, Markus Vinzent, has therefore invited scholarship, to read Eckhart more in line with his imaginative imageries, showing that Eckhart was not subjugating nature to grace, but embodying sexuality<sup>66</sup> which, as will be expounded here, can even be seen as *sublime spiritual and linguistic hypersexuality*.

### 1.3 A few elements of desire

We humans have thousands of words in our language, and we use many of them in our vocabulary; yet, often we do not even know where many of these words came from or what they mean. We are a ‘wordy-lot’. Take the word *desire* for instance, it is used a great deal, and it has different meanings for different people. In fact, desire is used differently by the lay-person in everyday life than how it is used say by theologians, philosophers, or psychologists. One way it is used in everyday speech is this:

Desire is a sense of longing for a person or object or hoping for an outcome. The

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<sup>64</sup> DW III Pr.83, *Renouamini spiritu* (Ephes.4,23), J. Quint, (1976), 584-586.

<sup>\*</sup> Turner’s own bracketed word.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>66</sup> See M. Vinzent: *The Art of Detachment* (2011).

same sense is expressed by emotions such as "craving" or "hankering". When a person desires something or someone, their sense of longing is excited by the enjoyment or the thought of the item or person, and they want to take actions to obtain their goal.<sup>67</sup>

To add to the meaning of desire or the use of this word, Westerink tells that there is a theological-philosophical meaning to the word desire.<sup>68</sup> For instance, he points out that Augustine used it to mean libido. It was a usage that was to influence Reformation theologians and the Catholic Reformer Cornelius Jansenius who saw desire as *delectatio*, i.e. a desire for God in contrast to sinful libidinal desire. That Baruch Spinoza described 'desire as the very essence of man' and a 'quiet intellectual desire for God' in contrast to Calvin who saw desire as a 'desperate need for salvation and an existential fear of God's wrathful condemnation'.

Desire for Luther, taking his cue from St. Paul is 'a wish to do good and avoid evil', but this desire to do good is frustrated by sin which the law has instituted, for as Paul says, 'we only know sin and desire through the law'.<sup>69</sup> This frustration or inability to achieve one's desire, leads to hatred, guilt, and fear. Is the law evil then? No, it is not according to Paul, for the 'law is holy and good'.<sup>70</sup> The hatred is for sin. For sin fights against one's *will* to do good, and instead causes one to do evil.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, Eckhart theological language also speaks about 'desire' as is observed in at least two accounts of his: Desire is implied here in the story of the Genesis temptation as related by Eckhart. He in effect says that: 'the evil spirit secretly plots against the inner man of the Nobleman, and that the serpent woos Lady Eve, and

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<sup>67</sup> Although many academicians are justifiably skeptical and critical about the use of the Internet, and particularly *Wikipedia* as a source for reliable and credible information, this skepticism needn't preclude or exclude the use of the Internet and *Wikipedia* as a starting point to look for information. If this information is cross-checked against other references for validity, we often find that some internet materials can pass academic muster. So for instance, this *Wikipedia* definition of *desire* is workable in defining the everyday understanding of the word *desire*. In fact, this *Wikipedia* source gives a satisfactory overview of desire in its many uses. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desire>

<sup>68</sup> *The Heart of Man's Destiny: Lacanian psychoanalysis and early Reformation thought*, 28-30.

<sup>69</sup> 'But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead'. Romans 7:8. New King James Version (NKJV).

<sup>70</sup> 'So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good'. (Romans 7:12), New International Version (NIV).

<sup>71</sup> 'For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice'. (Romans 7:15,19).

through her, her man Adam'.<sup>72</sup>

So there is here an assumption that Eve too is overcome by desire to part-take of the forbidden fruit and to become wise as gods.<sup>73</sup> Eckhart refers to Adam's sin to illustrate the point of concupiscence, "There was nothing evil" says Eckhart "in the forbidden fruit, since it was 'good, beautiful and sweet to eat'. But the 'woman', who signifies sensuality, was struck by this beauty and sweetness. She already conceived and at the same time brought forth sin by conceiving".<sup>74</sup> (Gen.3:6)

#### 1.4 Desire in Eckhart and Lacan

Much of Eckhart's theological language is sexually expressive. He was a pre-eminent linguistic practitioner who got beyond the language of medieval scholasticism in talking about love for God. He spoke or wrote in a language that seemed to pre-date and foreshadow post-modern structuralism. He skillfully deconstructed contemporary modes of thoughts about love, about God, and the Godhead, about the "I " and the "Ego"; and, instead created new signifiers, and significations that used heuristic devices to get to the truth hidden behind reality.

Over six centuries later, Jacques Marie Émile Lacan (1901–1981) a French psychoanalyst, and a post-structuralist theorist in works like *Écrits*, seemed to believe like Eckhart did, that reality cannot be captured in language. But Lacan's writings although technically spectacular, often become severely convoluted and impenetrable.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> "Derselbe böse Geist hält beständig Zwiesprache mit dem äußeren Menschen, und durm ihn stellt er heimlich allzeit dem inneren Menschen nam, ganz so wie die Schlange mit Frau Eva plauderte und durdl sie mit dem Manne Adam", (vgl. 1 Mos.3,1ff.). DW 5, Traktat 1, Liber "Benedictus" II, Vom edlen Menschen, Quint, pp.498-499.

<sup>73</sup> The Judaeo-Christian notion of sin does also involve desire; that is, the desire to be as wise as God himself. This desire to be wise is implied in these two verses:

*For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.*

*And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. (Gen. 3:5.6, KJV).*

<sup>74</sup> LW Commentary on Exodus, *Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, transl. McGinn *et al*, 109.

<sup>75</sup> Here is a very brief sample of Lacan's work: 'Thus the erectile organ comes to symbolize the place of jouissance, not in itself, or even in the form of an image, but as a part lacking in the desired image: that is why it is equivalent to the  $\sqrt{-1}$  [square root of minus one] of the signification produced above, of the *jouissance* that it restores by the coefficient of its statement to the function of lack of signifier (-1). *Écrits* p.353.

But Eckhart's writings in contrast, especially his vernacular homilies, although sometimes controversial and provocative, with even some of his teachings judged to be heretical; nonetheless, his writings or those that can be judged to be 'genuine' are mostly enjoyable; and, they are often delivered tongue-in-cheek: and, even his scholastic writings which are technically and artistically crafted, lend themselves to comprehension even in translation.

Now, although Eckhart flourished between the late 13th and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries when he spoke to his contemporaries in the scholastic, and in the vernacular languages that they understood, spoke in a language that at that time was natural and relevant although, admittedly, his audiences often did not understand his speech. For example, he, on more than one occasion said: 'Whoever does not understand, let him not worry'. (*Wer's nicht versteht, der bekümmere sim nicht*).<sup>76</sup>

However, now removed almost some 700 years from Eckhart, we can perhaps see why his hearers at the time had difficulty understanding him. For we, now having the benefit of hindsight, realize that he was speaking a language that was far in advance of its time. We can safely say that Eckhart was truly a pioneer or a forerunner of a kind of language, or a mode of intellectual thought which in the late 1960s came to be called post-structuralism which *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines as a:

Movement in literary criticism and philosophy begun in France in the late 1960s. Drawing upon the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida it held that language is not a transparent medium that connects one directly with a "truth" or "reality" outside it but rather a structure or code, whose parts derive their meaning from their contrast with one another and not

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Possible solution to Lacan's proposition: Erectile organ is more than the physical penis; it is the phallus (the imaginary object in which the subject identifies himself, *Écrits* p.216-218). In other words, the phallus is an indicator of the desire for the Other, or the signifier of desire. The phallus also is the Imaginary Mother.

*Jouissance*, is sexual pleasure which because of prohibitions or restrictions placed in its way (the limits of the pleasure-principle), as a result, *jouissance* becomes suffering or unrequited love.

The square root of negative one is an imaginary concept in maths for there is not a real number having a negative square. Thus, this imaginary value becomes a metaphor for the phallus that the Symbolic Father has, and that the Imaginary Mother desires, but this desire can never be met. This imaginary desire on her part then becomes *jouissance*. This explanation is difficult as best, but worst, how the penis or phallus becomes an algebraic expression is somehow baffling.

<sup>76</sup> DW1, *Sermo* 16a, [last para.]. p. 491, Josef Quint, Kohlhammer, (1958). Cf. Walshe's *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol.1, pp.121-122.

from any connection with an outside world. Writers associated with the movement include Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Michel Foucault.<sup>77</sup>

Eckhart resorts to the apophatic tradition, by the use of expressions such as *abyss*, *desert*, *spark*, etc. to express union with God. Actually, he transcends the apophatic language. For Eckhart says: 'God is a being to whom nothing is, or can be similar' (*got ist ein wesen, dem niht glîch enist noch niht glîch enmac werden*).<sup>78</sup> This statement shows that he uses language that since Freud (and not wishing to be anachronistic) comports to a psychoanalytic interpretation that reveals the connection between humanity and divinity *via* sexuality.

'Now, if the Godhead', suggests Ian Almond 'is radically dissimilar from anything we can name or think, then every act of naming will only push the Godhead away from us. In this sense the Godhead, as opposed to some transcendent, ineffable unity, almost becomes a dynamic otherness, one which will constantly elude us as long as we desire to name or think it – that is, as long as we subscribe to the very kind of essence-seeking ontology Eckhart is trying to free us from'.<sup>79</sup>

So based on the foregoing statements, Eckhart therefore offers us not purely a metaphysical view of love and God, but, also offers us a psycho-analytic view of ourselves; of the 'Other'; of our relationship to our neighbour, and our relationship and understanding of God, and the Godhead. So it is through the intricate structures of language, not words *per se*, but the meanings associated with words, their oppositions, contrasts, etc. - or talk about talk - that Eckhart allows us to distinguish between reality (the fantasy world we create for ourselves), and the real world of existence that lay beyond language, and thus beyond comprehensibility.

### 1.5 Lacan's desire vs. Eckhart's desire

Briefly and simply put, desire (*désir*) for Lacan is not merely an individual appetite but it something that is endless and ongoing. It is as if each time one tries to assuage it, it recedes further in the distant horizon. As Lacan's English translator of *Écrits* says:

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<sup>77</sup> [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/472274/poststructuralism](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/472274/poststructuralism) [accessed 27 May 2013].

<sup>78</sup> See Quint, DW 3, *Pr.* 69, p.170.

<sup>79</sup> *Vide*, [www.academia.edu/408726/Negative\\_Theology\\_DerridaDerrick\\_and\\_the\\_Critique\\_of\\_Presence\\_A\\_Post-structuralist\\_](http://www.academia.edu/408726/Negative_Theology_DerridaDerrick_and_the_Critique_of_Presence_A_Post-structuralist_) [accessed June 2013].

Desire ... is a perpetual effect of symbolic articulation. It is not an appetite: it is essentially excentric and insatiable. That is why Lacan co-ordinates it not with the object that would seem to satisfy it, but the object that causes it.<sup>80</sup>

Desire is hedged around by need (*besoin*) and demand (*demande*). Needs are particular physical necessities that the biological organism requires to function and to be satisfied. Demand is for the recognition and love of other people. This (demand) can never be completely or absolutely fulfilled. So because demand can never be satisfied, there exists a *lack*, and it is this lack that becomes desire. This is what Eckhart says about desire citing (in double quotation marks) Aquinas:

“When something that is loved is not possessed”, this lack makes the love felt outside in the body. Therefore, “the first among the passions of desire (or a thing desired) is that sensible concupiscence” which is found in the sense power.<sup>81</sup>

So two things are noticed here: That just like Lacan, Eckhart and Aquinas link desire to lack. Secondly, concupiscence or libido is that which causes lack, and this lack is situated in the bodily senses. Eckhart alluding to the Philosopher (Aristotle) says:

Hatred, strife, envy, fear, wrath, sorrow, and similar things arise from the lack of something desired which when present and acquired gives peace and extinguishes all passions.<sup>82</sup>

Lack, under their plan has its roots in the appetitive or animalistic side of humans, presumably it is beyond the control of reason. However, under Eckhart, lack does not seem to have a theological causation.

Now, updating the pathology of lack, and not ascribing its epidemiology to any dualistic nature in humans; and, furthermore, subjecting this syndrome to a modern psycho-analytic diagnosis, the problem of lack becomes a psychological state, linked to the pleasure-pain axis.

But still for all, desire which could still possibly be achieved under the old model of at least Aristotle's plan: where 'peace could be acquired and passions extinguished' if concupiscence were eliminated; under the Lacanian plan however, this

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<sup>80</sup> Translator's Note, xi. Alan Sheridan, Routledge Classics, London, (2001).

<sup>81</sup> »Quando vero« res amata »non habetur«, ipsa indigentia facit sentire foris in corpore amorem. Propter quod »inter omnes passiones concupiscibilis« sive rei concupitae prima »est ipsa concupiscentia, sensibilis« facta in sensu .... See LW11 Expositio libri Exodi, Cap. 20v. 17:228, p.189. Heribert Fisher et al., Kohlhammer, Stuttgart (1992). See McGinn *et al*, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, Paulist Press, NY. (1986), 115.

<sup>82</sup> LW11 Expositio libri Exodi, 210: 'Odium enim, rixa, invidia, timor, ira, dolor. et similia consurgunt ex carentia concupiti, quo praesente et adepto quiescunt et extinguuntur omnes passiones'. Ibid. 210. p. 176. See McGinn *et al*, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, Paulist Press, NY. (1986), 110.

opportunity of fulfilling desire does not exist. For actually, the pain that comes with lack is the *bliss* that constitutes desire.

For Graham Ward thinks that some of the principal expositors of phenomenology like Deleuze, Lacan, Lyotard, Barthes, Foucault and Žižek seem to have institutionalised or embodied lack. Ward says:

‘Suffering constitutes itself as the lack or absence of *jouissance*’. He continues, ‘desire only operates if there remains an *objet petit a*, - a hole, a gap, a loss that can never (and must never) be fully negotiated or filled’. He goes on to say: ‘Bliss is endlessly deferred yet remains the telos and organizing point for any local and ephemeral construction of the meaning of embodiment’.<sup>83</sup>

So he is suggesting that phenomenologists seek as it were utopia, but what they enjoy instead is dystopia. This kind of oxymoronic or paradoxical situation reminds us of Juliet's bitter-sweet lament:

Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.  
Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow  
(Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2)

She is saying to Romeo that "parting is sorrowful but also sweet": Meaning that parting is as intense and agonizing as the bliss she has when they are together. That the same love that delights in the beloved is the same love that hurts when the beloved is apart from her. So love and sorrow; joy and the pain are along the same continuum, but each - lack and desire - are on the opposite side of the affective spectrum, and both, as it is with love and sorrow cannot be separated from the continuum. So as Ward elsewhere suggests that: 'With Lacan and Žižek, the lack itself is pleasurable'.<sup>84</sup>

In the Lacanian scheme, the basic thesis is that desire is essentially a desire for recognition from the ‘Other’; it is also the desire for the thing that we suppose the Other desires, which is to say, the thing that the Other lacks. Westerink remarks that:

Demand is played out in the Imaginary Order: This order corresponds to the mirror stage, and marks the movement of the subject from its primal stage or primal need to what Lacan terms "demand." The imaginary stage is characterized by the dual relationship of child and mother .... This stage gives rise to one's first sense of identity through identification with an image of oneself. In the mirror the child's bodily unity is reflected, a reflection that

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<sup>83</sup> *Christ and Culture, Contemporary Pain and Pleasure*, Blackwell (2005), 250-251.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 250.



implies alienation since the image is different from the original - the image as ego-ideal does not exist.<sup>85</sup>

However, the Imaginary stage is a fantasy world which the child sets up in order to compensate for its sense of lack or loss, and it is what Lacan terms an "Ideal-I" or "ideal ego". That fantasy image of oneself can be provided by others whom we set up as role models for ourselves. Such a mirror image of ourselves however, constitutes a narcissistic relationship. It is also noteworthy to know that this imaginary realm continues to exert its influence throughout the life of the adult, and this realm of the imaginary does not completely stop just because the child moves into the symbolic realm. Indeed, the imaginary and the symbolic are, according to Lacan, inextricably intertwined and work in tension with the Real.

The next stage is the Symbolic Stage. This is marked by so-called castration. However, it is not the physical mutilation of genitalia, or physical banishment, or social ostracisation; but, rather a renunciation of the desire that the child has to be the phallic Thing; that is the object of affection for its mother. The phallus is the indicator of the desire of the Other. In other words, the castration phenomenon represents the transition from the imaginary stage to the symbolic. This stage, according to Lacan's version of the Oedipus complex, is circumscribed by a prohibition - the law of the father - on the mutually possessive relation of the child with the mother. In other words, the child no longer has monopoly (and this is the father's commandment) of the mother's love - she no longer is the child's phallus, or object of desire.

In addition, it is at this stage - the Symbolic Order - that language and narrative come to the fore. That is, once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, it is able to deal with others. The symbolic is made possible because of the child's acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father; that is, those laws and restrictions that control both one's desire and the rules of communication.

Next comes the Real Stage though it does not successively nor sequentially follow the previous stage, for the other two prior stages cannot be divorced from the Real stage. The Real is somewhat nebulous and refers to that which is authentic - the unchangeable truth in reference both to being/the Self and the external dimension of

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<sup>85</sup> *The Heart of Man's Destiny: Lacanian psychoanalysis and early Reformation thought, Desire the law and the Thing*, Routledge, East Sussex, UK. (2012), 30.

experience, also referred to as the infinite and absolute as opposed to a reality based on sense perception and the material order.<sup>86</sup>

The Real is the primal state, the state of nature from which we have been forever severed by our entrance into language. From a world of need to a world of want. Only as neo-natal children were we close to this state of nature, a state in which there is nothing but need .... For this reason, Lacan sometimes represents this state of nature as a time of fullness or completeness that is subsequently lost through the entrance into language. The Real works in tension with the imaginary order and the symbolic order.<sup>87</sup>

### 1.6 Lacan's stages and Eckhart's stages

Lacan takes us through the three stages, one of which includes the 'mirror stage' of personality development,<sup>88</sup> and in these stages we see parallels to Eckhart's ontology; for example, in Eckhart's six stages (see pp. 67/128 below) of the *Nobleman's* journey.

For instance, Lacan's Imaginary stage is Eckhart's First stage where the child upon leaving his mother's lap and breasts, he or she now looks up and smiles in the face of the heavenly father.<sup>89</sup> Also, Lacan's Imaginary Order or the 'mirror stage' - reflected in the lives of significant others - is analogous to Eckhart's *Nobleman*, where the child, or in this case, the soul, still at stage 1, looks to religious figures as its role models for what a saintly life should be.

Moving on to Lacan's Symbolic Order (or the big 'Other'), this corresponds to Eckhart's stage two, where the *Nobleman* gives up what is human and moves up towards God; where he leaves behind human authority, and uses the steps of his mind and moves up towards the highest and unchanging law.

However, Lacan's model appears to have no further direct application to Eckhart's stage three to six; for, it is at these latter stages that the *Nobleman* does fully become the Other, and he no longer suffers estrangement, lack, loss, *jouissance*, need, demand; neither does he suffer from unrelenting, unsatiating, and unsustainable desire.

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<sup>86</sup> See [www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/real.html](http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/real.html)

<sup>87</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>88</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection*. This presentation here is freely based on the 'Translator's Note', pp. X1-X111. transl. Alan Sheridan, Routledge, London (2001).

<sup>89</sup> Eckhart's six stages of the *Nobleman* are dealt with at some length in Chapter Three: 'Courtly love and sexual imageries in Eckhart and Porete, Stages of Union' in the main body below of this present work.

Actually, Eckhart's *Nobleman*, himself, is *desire*. But moreover, Eckhart's *Nobleman* incrementally progresses towards an epiphany; and, here through the use of symbolic language, Eckhart allows us to see the *Nobleman* experiencing God – rather, he becomes the Son of God, by an epical act called *Geburt* - i.e., *Birth of the Son in the Soul*: This is a psycho-sexual union between the mystic and the divine.

Now, as suggested before there are strong correspondences between Eckhart and Lacan. For the latter's 'philosophical anthropology (his answer to the question: what is it to be human) involves ... human desire [which] is "the desire of the other"; and what he contends is at stake in the child's socialisation is its aspiration to be the fully satisfying object for the mother, a function which is finally (or at least normally) fulfilled by the Law-bearing words of the father. Human-being, for Lacan, is thus (as decentred) vitally a speaking animal (what he calls *a parole-etre*); one whose desire comes to be "inmixed" with the imperatives of, and stipulated within, the natural language of its society'.<sup>90</sup>

Eckhart too in trying to explain being also resorts to psycho-analytical language to explain union with the divine. The philosophical and theological topics that Eckhart dealt with were not new, but he dealt with them in a novel, and even in unorthodox ways. His homilies delivered in the local vernacular endeared him to his hearers, but of course, infuriated some of his detractors. He spoke in riddles and was not always understood; but, he was sometimes self-deprecating, humorous, and gave his listeners the benefit of the doubt.

As a reminder, on a few occasions he told his hearers 'not to worry if they couldn't understand his sermons'.<sup>91</sup> On one of these occasions, Meister Eckhart when

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<sup>90</sup> Vide, Matthew Sharpe, [www.iep.utm.edu/lacweb/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/lacweb/) [accessed June 2013].

<sup>91</sup> [Mod. German] "Wer's nicht versteht, der bekümmere sich nicht". DW1, *Sermo* 16a, [last para.] p. 491, Josef Quint, Kohlhammer (1958).

Cf. Walshe's *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, "Whoever does not understand, let him not worry". vol.1, pp.121-122. [Mod. German], "Wer diese Rede nicht versteht, der bekümmere sein Herz nicht damit. Denn, solange der Mensch dieser Wahrheit nicht gleicht, solange wird er diese Rede nicht verstehen; denn dies ist eine unverhüllte Wahrheit, die da gekommen ist aus dem Herzen Gottes unmittelbar". DW2, *Sermo* 52, lns. 506-509, p. 731, Josef Quint, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart (1971).

"If anyone cannot understand this sermon, he need not worry. For so long as a man is not equal to this truth, he cannot understand my words, for this is a naked truth which has come direct from the heart of God". Cf. Walshe, vol.11, p.276.

[Middle High German] "Swere dise predige hât verstanden, dem gan ich ir wol. Enwære hie nieman

delving into some deep neo-platonic ideas, enigmatically stated: “When I subsisted in the ground in the bottom, in the river and fount of Godhead, no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing...”.<sup>92</sup>

We notice that Eckhart speaks here in the past tense, and uses the word ‘in’ (*in dem*) to show the relationship to where he was, i.e. ‘the bottom’, ‘the river’, etc. Later as we will see, he repeats this statement, but uses the future tense using the word ‘into’ (*in den*) instead of ‘in’ (*in dem*) in respect of where he will be in the ground, etc.

Eckhart in this discussion, suddenly seemed to realize that he had lost his audience, and that they were puzzled. So backtracking, he said: “If anyone asked me, ‘Brother Eckhart, when did you leave your house?’, then I was in there”.<sup>93</sup> However, the “then I was in there” phrase seems to be no answer at all; if anything, it is incoherent.

However, what he meant was that he had never left his house to go to any river or anywhere else for that matter to find God. That just like how he lives in (*in dem*) his house, in the same way, he lives in God. So being *in* or *inside* his house, and not going anywhere to find God is analogous to him being in or inside God, and finding Him right there with-in him.

But this is only half the story of Eckhart’s “then I was in there” phrase; for, he further adds: “That is how all creatures speak of God”.<sup>94</sup> What he means by this latter statement is that this *in* or *inside* view - living in God - is a restricted way of experiencing God; that, the real thing is not to be living *in* or *inside* the house, but living *outside* – rather, changing into the house or equivocally changing into God

Now, *in* or *inside* the house represents, or has all the attributes of God, like goodness, justice, love, omnipotence, and so forth; and it is these virtues that one has when one is *in* God. But more is required than these *in* attributes. One needs moreso to

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gewesen, ich müeste sie disem stocke geprediget hân”. DW4,2, *Predigt* 109, lns. 69-70, p.774, Georg Steer, Stuttgart (2003).

“Whoever has understood this sermon, good luck to him. If no one had been here I should have had to preach it to this ‘collecting-box’”. Walshe, vol.11, p. 82.

<sup>92</sup> [MHG] “Dô ich stuont in dem grunde, in dem bodem, in dem rivier und in dem quellenne der gotheit, envrâgete dô envrâgete mich nieman”, etc. DW4,2, *Predigt* 109, lns. 56-70, pp.771-774, Georg Steer, Stuttgart (2003).

Cf. Walshe, vol.11, pp.81-82.

<sup>93</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>94</sup> Op. cit.

be *outside* the house, or *become* the house. The becoming the house represents the Godhead which is the totality (the essence or substance) from which all things flow, and in which all things subsist. Even paradoxically, the inside is in the outside; and the outside is in the inside, i.e. God in man, and man in God, or God becomes man, and man becomes God.

*In* or *inside*, on one hand, also represents the physical, material, and sensory properties of the house which is analogous to the Aristotelian efficient cause – how a thing comes to be, and the tools that bring things into being; and, the final cause (*teleo*) – its function or purpose, and who is to enjoy that final outcome. Whilst the outside, represents the psychological, intellective and spiritual properties of the house, analogous to the Aristotelian material cause – the stuff from which things come, and of which things consist; and the formal cause – the form of a thing (the *eidos*) - the blueprint for all creation.

*Inside* is immanency; *outside* is transcendency. Inside is *self*; outside is the *Other* - the very root of Being. That is the goal for Eckhart, to enter the skin of God - His nakedness. “Therefore” says Eckhart elsewhere, “strip God of all His clothing – seize him naked in his robing-room, where He is uncovered and bare in Himself. Then you will ‘abide in Him’”.<sup>95</sup> This state of bareness and barrenness for Eckhart is the Godhead.

Eckhart further complicates things when he says, “God works, the Godhead does not work.... When I return to God, if I do not remain there, my breakthrough will be far nobler than my outflowing ...”. As has been suggested before, Eckhart now using the future tense repeats the refrain:

When I enter the ground, the bottom, the river and fount of the Godhead, none will ask me whence I came or where I have been. No one missed me, for there God unbecomes.<sup>96</sup>

Eckhart is here implying that one can only know God on the outside – that is, by one turning into God, and experiencing Him as the Godhead. This is to find the *non-God*. This is what he means then by the expression: ‘God unbecomes’. This is the

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<sup>95</sup> DW11, *Pr.* 40, transl. See Walshe, vol.11, pp. 118-119.

<sup>96</sup> Swenne ich kume in den grunt, in den bodem, in den rivier und in daz quellen der gotheit, sô envrâget mich nieman, wannen ich kume oder wâ ich sî gewesen. Da envermist mîn nieman. Dâ entwirt got. Ibid. Ins. 66-68, p. 773.

beatific vision that goes beyond all human language, knowledge, and intellect which apprehends the Godhead as the One, Pure, Simple, Undivided, Unknowable and Nameless.

These are profound Neo-platonic ideas, but they are re-casted by Eckhart in the post-Christian theological, and post-modern linguistic molds. It is because of these deep theological insights about *esse simpliciter* why Eckhart loses his audience, and now at this point, he metaphorically throws his hands up in the air and apologetically declares to his listeners: “Whoever has understood this sermon, good luck to him. If no one had been here I should have had to preach it to this collecting box...”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> DW4,2, *Predigt* 109, lns. 69-70, p.774.

## Chapter Two: Radically embodied hyper-sexuality as sublime spiritual mimesis - the historical stage

### 2.1 The semantic contours of the body

An explication and understanding of the presence of sexual imageries in Eckhart's ontological and theological corpus, will be better facilitated by a detailed morphological study of the body; and upon, and after a forensic examination of the biological system, we will hope to arrive at a better understanding of its internal dynamics in relationship to its ontological realities. So at the outset, let us examine the semantic contours of the body, and other epistemological variables associated with the body, including the literary landscape in which the body has been articulated; and, likewise, how the body has coloured the social and cultural architecture that defines *bodiliness*.

This is what Graham Ward postulates about the body and I will paraphrase him:

For him, philosophical consideration about the body showed that the body is gendered. That is, its meanings, the construction of its gender, the cultural specificities of the scientific interpretations of the body make it both a subject and an object that is created in the image of our intentional consciousness. He notes for instance that Christian theology shaped the anorexic body of the Middle Ages, and the heterosexual body of the nineteenth century. That Christian theology was and is profoundly involved in bio-politics.<sup>98</sup>

However, Ward seems to suggest that it was not until the coming of phenomenologist thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien and others that significant new meanings and understandings of the body emerged. There is now the realization that bodies are not just simply givens and that we have no immediate access to what is most intimately ours.<sup>99</sup>

In view of these new perspectives about the body, we will perform the foregoing analyses by mapping the topography of the body using linguistic tools or devices like metaphors, similes, and other such denotative and connotative figurations with an aim to understand the body's semantics, and its relevance to the sexual and religious discourse.

In addition, Michel Henry says this about the body:

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<sup>98</sup> *Christ and Culture: On the Eros of the Ecclesial Body* (Blackwell, 2005), 162-163.

<sup>99</sup> *Op.cit.*

The body is not only biological and historical, but also subjective. It is about intentionalities. There are intentionalities such as ‘to see’, ‘to hear’, ‘to sense’, ‘to move’, ‘to desire’, etc. But it is obvious that these bodily *Erlebnisse* represent only a part of the ensemble of our possible *Erlebnisse*, or to speak more exactly, it is obvious that the different eidetic types to which the intentionalities of the body corresponds in no way exhaust the totality of intentional eidetic types in general ...Henceforth the body ... the absolute body is in the strong sense a subjective body whose being is originally revealed in a sphere of absolute immanence and this in such a way that it is one with this very revelation’.<sup>100</sup>

Simply put, the body is not merely flesh, blood, and sinews. Not just mud, water, and electricity; but we live in, and it lives within us. It is a microscopic and a macroscopic world of experiences or consciousnesses; and, how we experience and interpret these consciousnesses are the driving forces that determine existence and our reality.

The body is like an apparition, yet real; it is believed to be a reflection of the eternal and the incorruptible – a mirror image of the Divine. It is a complicated and complex admixture of feelings and emotions. It is a cognitive apparatus yet a sentient machine. It is more than an obstacle course to be negotiated; it is more than a decaying mass of organic material that needs constant solicitude. It is a locus for giving and receiving an infinite amount of information, knowledge and wisdom. Yet it has a propensity for folly. It is courageous and foolhardy, and it is prone to cowardice. But it is capable too of re-information, re-newal and re-birth. It does not easily conform to a simplistic notion of dualism. In mystical talk, it awaits its transformation, its deification, and its glorification. Such is the body – it is an enigma. The body is a work in progress.

The cosmic forces of space-time dimensions are beyond the body’s ken and control, so a body/brain<sup>101</sup> mutuality has developed as a coping strategy to *humanify*

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<sup>100</sup> *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, p.185.

<sup>101</sup> In a discussion between two prominent brain experts, i.e., David Eagleman, a neuroscientist at Baylor College of Medicine in Texas, and Raymond Tallis, former professor of geriatric medicine at Manchester University, England, the former argues that: ‘...The brain is utterly alien to us, and yet our personalities, hopes, fears and aspirations all depend on the integrity of this biological tissue .... Because when the brain changes, we change. Our personality, decision-making, risk-aversion, the capacity to see colours or name animals – all these can change, in very specific ways, when the brain is altered by tumours, strokes, drugs, disease or trauma. As much as we like to think about the body and mind living separate existences, the mental is not separable from the physical’. Eagleman’s position at face value seems a *deterministic* one, which essentially sees the neuro-chemical functions of this organ as mainly responsible for defining the totality of who we are.



these unknown, unknowable, and incalculable odds against it; but in the process, it deifies supernatural forces, unites and adapts itself to these forces. The body/brain mutuality has therefore gained affinity with divinity. It is because of the body/brain convergence with divinity, both subconsciously and consciously, that sexually through the libidinal drives, converges with religion, and religion converges with sexuality, and both experiences – religion and sexuality – become synthesised, and at times undifferentiated.

Now, sexuality need not necessarily be mere physical stimulation of some human erogenous zone of the body, or some mental or erotic excitation of the brains. Neither, does religion necessary mean that the sacred or non-profane activity is devoid of any erotic sensations. Sexuality can function as a religious experience and become a substitute for religion, and religion can function as a surrogate for sexuality, and each one of them can mutually reinforced the other. The brain/body ratio or equation is finely balanced – they counter-balance each other – so they are each other's counterweight. The body/brain equation is not solely the Cartesian 'cogito ergo sum' dictum; it is also this author's 'sentio ergo sum' dictum; the latter aphorism being the other half of the equation.

Based on the forgoing explication of the semantic contours of the body, the brain cannot be divorced from religious experiences, nor from sexual experiences; neither can both the religious and the sexual experiences divorced from the body/brain unity. It is therefore, within this paradigm that sexual fantasies are played out in religion, and religion played out in sexual desires and fantasies. The following definition may suffice to describe sexual fantasy. A sexual fantasy is a pattern of thoughts with the effect of creating or enhancing sexual feelings. It is any mental

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However, Tallis takes another view, and this is that we are more than just a cerebral apparatus; more than the sum total of our cognitive awareness. He of course concurs that although the brain helps to construct the world around us, that there are still other important variables besides the brain that determine who we are. He says: 'Yes, of course, everything about us, from the simplest sensation to the most elaborately constructed sense of self, requires a brain in some kind of working order.... [But] It does not follow that our brains are pretty well the whole story of us, nor that the best way to understand ourselves is to stare at "the neural substrate of which we are composed". This is because we are not stand-alone brains. We are part of community of minds, a human world that is remote in many respects from what can be observed in brains'. So by virtue of my use of the term *body/brain mutuality* in this study, Tallis' position is in line with my thinking. See *The brain... it makes you think. Doesn't it?* The Observer, 29 April 2012.

imagery that is sexually arousing to any individual. A sexual fantasy may be a positive or a negative, a real or an imaginary experience.<sup>102</sup>

## 2.2 Asceticism

Asceticism (*Ασκητισμός*) or Asketismos (*Askêsis*) ‘is a discipline or a practice; a bodily piety, and part of its characteristic inheres in its repetition and in its careful modulation. It is renunciation, but it is also self-formation: creating a body completely emptied of content and meaning while constructing a ‘self’ worthy of transformation. So, asceticism can include sexual renunciation, fasting, mortification (sleeping on the floor, sleep deprivation, and some of the more elaborate inflictions of pain or duress upon the body); but also study, repetitive activity, simple life. Thus asceticism has mental and spiritual resonance’.<sup>103</sup>

Chasten the body, save the soul: This is the rallying cry of ascetics. Because of Neo-Platonic and Gnostic ideas that prevailed in the religious-philosophical minds of many early disparate groups of people, the body was held in an especially ambiguous no-man’s land, or twilight zone where it was an unequal, and an *inferior* partner in relationship to the *superior* soul.

For example, Gnostics, Manicheans, and Neo-Platonists believed that the body was ‘evil’ and of course, Augustine himself before his conversion to Christianity had been a Manichee and later an adherent of Neo-Platonist philosophy. He waged a great struggle against sexual desire which he despised and relegated to lust or concupiscence. In his *Confessions* for example, he says: ‘... out of the muddy concupiscence of the flesh, and the bubblings of my youth, mists fumed up which beclouded and overcast my

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<sup>102</sup> In Sister Benedicta Ward’s translation, ‘The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers’: *How to deal with the warfare which lusts arouses in us*, she details the sexual travails, lusts, fantasies, and the alleged influence of demons on the desert ascetics; temptations and sins which they experienced and fought against. Usually the source of temptations was the appearance of women, either imaginary or the presence of physically real ones. Although on one occasion lust resulted in homosexuality where it was reported that, “Those two brothers sleep together”. (Saying 49,15). However, these desert fathers were overcome by lust (or lust brought about these imaginary experiences) when either imagined or actual women, ‘beautiful’ or ‘foul-smelling’ appeared to them. Some of the desert fathers also in their desire to get married saw this desire as lust. Lust for others was the desire to have sexual intercourse, or lust was just the act of doing it. Also, what they termed fornication whether in their thoughts or by their actions was put down to lust. (Oxford, 1986), 7-20.

<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, ‘Mortifying the Body, Curing the Soul’: *Beyond Ascetic Dualism in The Life of Saint Syncretica*, *Differences* 4 (1992), 134-53.

heart, and I could not discern the clear brightness of love, from the fog of lustfulness'.<sup>104</sup> These schools of 'concupiscentia' including Augustine's wrestled with *problem of evil*. Augustine ultimately attributed 'evil' to *free will*.<sup>105</sup>

These Gnostic, Manichean, and Neo-Platonist notions whether of dualism, monism or pluralism about ultimate principles, when married to Christian ontological, mystical, and epistemological thought, and viewed through the lenses of Jewish cosmogony delineated in the book of Genesis; the 'problem of evil' which was always a puzzle to man, now seemed to be resolved by the theory of the 'Fall of Man', and Original Sin. (However traditional Judaism rejected this notion of original Sin).<sup>106</sup>

The fall-of-man-theory and its repercussions meant several things to Christian thinkers and moralists. It represented man's alienation from his true source – God. Original sin, because it accounted for man's banishment from God could also explain the presence of suffering, toil, labour, pain and evil; but, more importantly, solve the ultimate riddle of physical death.

Although the original sin formulation was construed to be concupiscence, only later did Christian scholars like Augustine<sup>107</sup> see original sin – that of eating the forbidden fruit – as disobedience,<sup>108</sup> which was a gateway to the sex act, which then led to the defilement of the body. So sex was now inextricably linked to the fall of man or

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<sup>104</sup> *Confessions*: Book XI 2 transl. E.B Pusey, Dent, London (1946), 21.

<sup>105</sup> *Confessions*, Book V11.5.

<sup>106</sup> The doctrine of original sin is totally unacceptable to Jews (as it is to Christian sects such as Baptists and Assemblies of God). Jews believe that man enters the world free of sin, with a soul that is pure and innocent and untainted. While there were some Jewish teachers in Talmudic times who believed that death was a punishment brought upon mankind on account of Adam's sin, the dominant view by far was that man sins because he is not a perfect being, and not, as Christianity teaches, because he is inherently sinful.

<sup>107</sup> Of course, St. Augustine was opposed in his views about sexuality, original sin, free-will, concupiscence and so on by some of his contemporaries. Some of his opponents included Julian of Eclanum and other significant Christian disputants. Brown in his book 'The Body and Society' points to some of these contentious issues and divergences between Augustine and some of his critics over the body. For instance, Brown says: '... we tend to believe that Augustine scored an overwhelming victory in the Great Sex war of the fifth century. In reality given the diversity of micro-Christendoms that had emerged within the provinces of the Latin West, the rise of Augustine as the dominant teacher of the Latin Church involved a series of matches with critics in many regions ... Augustine never won a total victory.' Introduction lxv. (Columbia, 2008).

<sup>108</sup> Joyce Salisbury reports: 'Augustine said there would have been blameless coitus in Paradise, for God had created man and woman in such a way as to make that possible. Adam and Eve's sin was, rather, in not waiting for God to lift the prohibition on the forbidden fruit of sexuality. There, the primary sin in Augustine's view was not sex, but disobedience ... Adam and Eve presumed to disobey God's will, and by this presumption they fell into the sin of pride'. See Joyce Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins, Augustine Sexual Revolution* (London, 1991), 42.

to original sin. This corruption caused by *lust* led both to man's spiritual and physical demise. The spiritual demise took the form of the soul being subject to alienation or lack of emotional and psychic intimacy with God, and the physical demise, meant man's physical death.

Despite man's estrangement from God, he still had an affinity with divinity, because he possessed the spirit which was God's. The body or the flesh however, was beyond physical redemption, and it was doomed to decay; and sooner or later returned to the earth from which it came. Taken together then, the geo-cosmic and theological disfiguration, depreciation, and diminution of man's status seek re-formation and re-integration back into the divine substance. But while man waits that time of restoration to pre-fall conditions, the outer man – the body or the flesh – is at war with the inner man. The outer man fights against the inner man by letting into the soul through its sensory apertures, contaminated and infected worldly material.

This struggle, this dualistic<sup>109</sup> conflict between the body and the soul, between the carnal and the spiritual is captured in the Pauline *angst* where Paul sees the body as irrevocably and irreparably damaged by sin. That the body, as a mere earthen shell or husk, is in need of 'mortifying' (Rom.8: 13), but which at the same time, paradoxically, must be kept 'quickened' or 'alive'; kept intact and pure until the 'coming of the Lord' (1 Thess. 4:13-15), because the body houses some precious commodities like the soul and the spirit.

Paul characterises the body as 'vile'; yet simultaneously, it is the 'temple of the Holy Ghost' (1 Cor. 6:19). To mediate between these warring parties certain ascetic practices must be performed. So the author of the Pauline letter exhorts: *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.* (Col. 3:5)<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> However, Prof. Dietmar Mieth (University of Tuebingen) Fellow at the Max Weber Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Erfurt informs me that: 'The anthropology in the letters of Paul is not as dualistic as assumed. This is more the reception and transformation by neoplatonic understanding'. In the Report to PhD candidate 11/04/13. That is possible bearing in mind also that some of the epistles ascribed to Paul are thought by some scholars like E.P. Sanders, not to have been written by Paul; and, so these are *deutero-Pauline*. Some of these 'pseudographical' letters include for example, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, etc.

<sup>110</sup> New International Version Bible.

Now, those who would wished to seek God in greater earnestness, and believed that the body was a choke point against the soul; they, now being armed with theological, rational, and ideological tools began to undertake such disciplines; some, so extreme, that their very physical survival could not be guaranteed. Early Christians expected the imminent return of Jesus. Jesus himself as reported by one of the Gospellers seemed to have predicted such a quick return judging by the so-called end-times prophecies of Matthew.<sup>111</sup>

However, as the years passed, and Jesus had not yet come back, there were people now expressing doubts about such a Second Return, for clearly, it had been, and still was an expectation that he would return. So, 2 *Peter* addressed the doubters and reminded them that the *Parousia* was still yet to come, only that no specific time could be assigned to this occurrence.<sup>112</sup>

Now, some of the early Christians believed they could help to put an end to ‘this present age’ by speeding up the return of Christ, and by helping to establish his kingdom, and thereby partaking, and participating as early as possible, in this redeemed creation. So out of this eschatological and messianic fervour, asceticism developed, thrived, and spread to many corners of the Eastern and Western Empires.<sup>113</sup>

Asceticism means ‘training’, ‘discipline’, ‘denial’, and such other types of personal, physical, and mental renunciations,<sup>114</sup> but the practise has not only been

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<sup>111</sup> *And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places* (Matt.24: 6, 7).

<sup>112</sup> Peter declares: “First of all, do not forget that in the final days there will come sarcastic scoffers whose life is ruled by their passions. ‘What has happened to the promise of his coming?’ they will say, ‘Since our Fathers died everything has gone on just as it has since the beginning of creation!’ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; and in that day the heavens will be rolled up with a great noise, and the substance of the earth will be changed by violent heat, and the world and everything in it will be burned up”. (2 Peter 3:3 ff).

<sup>113</sup> Elaine Pagels informs us that: “The number of those who chose such *ascesis*, or spiritual ‘exercises’ was not large, compared with the number of believers who increasingly crowded the churches in the third century, but their role is significant; for these hermits lived out the ideal of which many other Christians only dreamed”. *The Paradise of Virginity Regained* (1989), 82.

Peter Brown also cites a report which says: “By the year 400, nearly 5000 monks were said to be settled at Nitria alone, and many thousands were scattered up and down the length of the Nile and even in the bleak, waterless mountains beside the Red Sea”. *The Body and Society* (Columbia, 2008), 215.

<sup>114</sup> Salisbury says: “... Perhaps ironically, among the most influential theorists of sexuality during this time of a paradigm shift between Roman and Christian were men and women who renounced sex to seek God in the solitude of the desert. In their struggles for chastity, they created a new vision of sexuality”. *When Sex Stopped Being a Social Disease: Sex and the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (London, 1991), 47.

connected to Christian pietism, but it has been practised by religious devotees of various faith groups, including, for example, Buddhists and Hindus.

Because sexual liaisons had been related to Original Sin, sex was considered fleshly, driven by lust, and for some instinctive reason, the physical act of copulation seemed to be impure, unseemly, and debilitating. It seemed also, that a view prevailed in pagan society that sex diluted or diminished masculine attributes. The notion that the 'seed' if propagated too much, or too often would lead to the feminisation of the male. A female man was to be avoided at all cost.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, where sexual intercourse was done – for procreation, not recreation – the partners engaging in sexual activity, not only were they to be chaste, that is engaging only in those actions that would not make the sex act any more sordid<sup>116</sup> than it already was; they, also had to be mindful of the religious calendar, when during those important calendar or holy days of the Church, sexual activity had to be shunned.

Plus, sexual involvement had to take account of times when females were considered 'impure', e.g., during menstruation. There was a belief that humans, certainly those who were on a path of holiness towards divine union; and those wanting to be like Christ would have to avoid having sexual intercourse; for sexual desire was ruled by passion – not intellect. Sexual passion was beyond the control of the Will,<sup>117</sup> so that made it capricious, irrational, tainted, and unworthy of people who were aspiring to be like God. Moreover, it bore the badge of shame as it usually had to be conducted in 'secret' and under a 'cover of darkness', both literally and figuratively. The sex act involved wild and uncontrollable passions, and as such, it was antithetical to God, who was a God of order.

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<sup>115</sup> See Brown, *Body and Society*, 18,19.

<sup>116</sup> Viewed from the spiritual realm, sex is generally disgusting and degrading. This contrasts sharply with the pleasures of sex that the fathers described [and abjured], but the contrast simply parallels the contrast between the spiritual and the carnal ... the goal for which the fathers urged people to strive was to have such disregard for all things carnal that the most pleasurable act was considered "foul" and "corruption". Salisbury's *The Early Fathers on Sexuality*, 21.

<sup>117</sup> Commenting of Augustine's view of sexuality, Eric Fuchs says: "... Augustine does not fall into the Manichean trap of confusing sexuality with sin. He firmly holds to the original goodness of sexuality. Even if there had been no 'fall', Adam and Eve would have had intercourse for procreation, but without passion, that is without shame.... Thus concupiscence is the consequence of original sin, and it forever marks sexuality with ambiguity, making it a threat wherein man is ceaselessly separated from himself, stripped of his reason and his control". *Sexuality and Desire* (1983), 116.

However, the practice of asceticism was not necessarily motivated by a ‘contempt for the human condition nor a hatred for the body’, but the privations of the body were endured for ‘the imagined transfiguration or eventual transformation of their bodies [into angelic ones] on the day of resurrection. The ascetics thought of themselves as men and women who had gained a precious freedom to mourn for their sins and to suffer in this life so that they might regain a future glory for their bodies’.<sup>118</sup>

### 2.3 Sexuality: a religious experience

In a profound sense, sex or sexual activity is a *religious* experience.<sup>119</sup> *Religious* also in the broad sense that religion is connected with the active verb ‘religare’ which means to bind. So religion imposes an obligation or duty upon us, and one of these fundamental duties is to affirm and reaffirm our humanity, that is our sexuality. This is an ontological and existential necessity. Sacred scriptures say: ‘Multiply and replenish’ (Gen. 1:28) That is, *be fruitful, be fecund, be virile*. This can only come about by sexual activity. For as Diotima reveals to Socrates:

Once we reach a certain point in the prime of our lives, we instinctively desire to give birth, but we find it possible only in an attractive medium, not a repulsive one – and yes, sex between a man and woman is a kind of birth. It’s a divine business; it is immortality in a mortal creature ... But it can’t take place where there is incompatibility, and whereas repulsiveness is incompatible with anything divine, beauty is compatible with it. (Symposium 206c)<sup>120</sup>

Now as Diotima observes there has to be *compatibility* for birth to take place, this compatibility is what Eckhart calls ‘sameness’ or ‘likeness of identity’. For in his treatise, *The Book of Divine Comfort* he says: ‘Likeness and identity in all things, but especially and primarily in the divine nature, represents the birth of the One ... The One is the origin and source of flowering and fiery love. Love by nature flows and springs forth from Two as One. One as One does not produce love, anymore than Two as Two

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<sup>118</sup> Brown: *Body and Society*, Columbia (2008), 222.

<sup>119</sup> I think I have support here in this claim, for as Andrew M. Greeley says: ‘It is also reasonable to argue that since sex is such a powerful force in human life, one’s view of sexuality will be intimately linked to one’s view of ultimate reality, and that therefore religion will shape attitudes toward sexuality and *vice versa* even after man has left the explicit fertility religions behind. However, there remains another possibility: sex may be sacred quite apart from the obvious sexual implications of the fertility cults found in nature religions. Sex since it participates in the life-producing powers of the universe, may be numinous and hierophantic quite independently of whether man’s primary mode of production is agriculture’. *The Persistence of Religion* (London, 1973), 173-174.

<sup>120</sup> Plato Symposium, transl. Robin Waterfield, *Socrates Speech* (Oxford, 2008), 48-49.

does, while Two as One necessarily produces according to its nature a powerful and fiery love'.<sup>121</sup>

So then for God to give birth He has to find *sameness* or *compatibility*, for as Eckhart remarks: "... God has 'lust and satisfaction where he finds sameness. He finds it lustful to pour his nature and his being completely into the sameness, for he is this sameness himself'".<sup>122</sup>

However, there are those who have become, or would like to become the gatekeepers of our conscience, our morality, and our sexuality; to whom we should entrust the safe-keeping of our souls; and in whom we should repose our eternal destiny. Such guardians of our morality want us to accept the notion of the *fall-of-man* theory; that, somehow because of the Fall narrative, sexuality presents, or represents a barrier between the Divine and us.<sup>123</sup>

This notion (the *fall of man*) however, has very dubious rationality and it is often grounded in faulty Gnostic metaphysics and dualisms; for it supposes that there is a disjoint between sexuality and virtue; between lust and holiness; that there is a chasm between the holy and the profane; that an unbridgeable gap exists between the body and the soul; that there is a fundamental chasm between humanity and divinity. But I will show by way of the sexual language of Eckhart, that there is no ontological chasm between the *outerman* and the *innerman* – they are just one person; that no antipathy exists between the sacred and the profane; that man is not the nemesis of God or *vice versa*.

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<sup>121</sup> DW V, Traktat i Liber 'Benedictus', Josef Quint, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 1963-87). transl. Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings* (1994), 70.

<sup>122</sup> DW I 200,1-3, Eckhart, *Pr.* 12: 'Alsô ist gote lustlich und genuoclich, dâ er glîcheit vindet. Ez ist im lustlich, daz er sîne natûre und sîn wesen alzemâle dâ giezende ist in die glîcheit, wan er diu glîcheit selber ist'.

<sup>123</sup> For instance, as Robert T. Francoeur, despite his *vituperative* mood in writing about sexually says: 'Augustine (354-430) has been, next to Paul, the greatest influence on Christian thought, both Protestant and Catholic. Augustine followed the Manichean dualism of Zoroaster in his youth, before he finally gave up two mistresses, converted to Christianity, and became a bishop. Augustine rejected Manichean dualism, but continued teaching that original sin was passed from parents to offspring by the passion and desire inherent in sexual intercourse'. However Francoeur does temper his acerbic mood when he informs us that: 'After 1,500 years of sharing a common history of sexual values, the Christian world experienced a schism. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Henry VIII fomented the Protestant Reformation and challenged the Vatican's sexual mores and celibate clergy, allowing divorce, married clergy, and eventually contraception and abortion. Meanwhile, the Catholic branch of Christianity maintained its more traditional sex-negative restrictive values'. See *Catholic Culture and Sexuality, Sexual Health*. Volume III, Chapter 3 (2005).



Without wishing to be pejorative, judgemental or moralistic, I will venture to say that the Christian religion (but I have to modify the assertion for the sake of accuracy by saying that a narrow idiosyncratic aspect of its teaching)<sup>124</sup> has long been the uncharitable *stepmother* of sex, and this religion has for a long time now bestowed its *doleful* blessings on sex. Because sex seemed to have been grudgingly sanctioned by God, or rather more accurately been dubiously and ambiguously sanctified by priestcraft, it has languished in the shadows. But lately, the nobility and profundity of sex is gradually emerging from its *Cinderella-like* status from which it has been historically assigned by significant religious authorities.<sup>125</sup>

Sexuality is now being recognised as incontestable, spiritual, moral, ethical, legal, moral and cultural truths about our existence. I think the time has arrived where there is recognition that sex is the *sine qua non* of this anthro-theological cosmology; and, more pertinently, that sexuality and sex should take their rightful place in their appropriate space, and one of these spaces is here in this discourse on sexual imageries in Meister Eckhart.

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<sup>124</sup> One has to be very careful here not to lump together all the religious groups or sects in Christianity as if they are all one religion. That is, the Christian religion is not a monolithic block of believers where all are agreed on one set of doctrines. So attitudes for example towards sexuality vary in Christianity as a whole, as they vary between different Christian groups, and vary even between members of the same organization.

But what I mean here though by the use of the term ‘Christian religion’ is the existence of a set, or mind-set of generalised, and even systematic, dogmatic and theological rules about sexuality that have been bequeathed to the society as a whole by the historically large and influential churches; views that are still privileged; and teachings that still seem to be the ideological preferences for the *status quo*. So on issues for example, as same-sex marriage and other types of non-traditional sexual relationships, if these are not approved (and they seem hardly likely to be approved anytime soon) by the significant religious stakeholders; then, these sexual practices are often rejected and condemned.

What seemed to have informed these sexual expectations and codes of behaviour are practices usually traceable back, in the case of Christianity, to the Bible, and specifically to those teachings of St. Paul on sexuality which were taken up by St. Augustine in the 4-5th centuries who gave these sexual theological strictures of Paul greater theological, philosophical, and rational salience.

<sup>125</sup> Again, Francoeur citing secondary sources says: ‘As Christine Gudorf reminds us, “The Roman Catholic Church (and Christianity in general) has in the last century drastically rethought the meaning of marriage, the dignity and worth of women, the relationship between the body and the soul, and the role of bodily pleasure in Christian life, all of which together have revolutionary implications for church teaching on sexuality and reproduction. In effect, the foundations of the old bans have been raised and their replacements will not support the walls of the traditional ban”’. Catholic Culture and Sexuality, *Sexual Health*. Vol. III, Cap. 3 (2005).

## 2.4 *Amor Vincit* or the language of courtly love

First, an overview of courtly love.<sup>126</sup> It is a complex phenomenon (although it seemed to have been several things and not just one monolithic thing), and scaffolding it were a cluster of identifiable<sup>127</sup> if exaggerated or extravagant principles. For instance, *rules* of love are enunciated by a kind of *Machiavellian*-type figure, a chaplain called Andreas Capellanus. In his treatise *De amore* (On love) addressed to one Walther, he sets out some 31 rules of love claiming that the God of Love himself, presumably Venus, gave them.

Here for example are a few of his rules: (I) Marriage is no real excuse for not loving; (II) He who is not jealous cannot love; (XIV) The easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized; (XXXI). Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.<sup>128</sup> Scholars often are in disagreement as to exactly what courtly love is. For instance, is it sexual love (erotic), non-sexual love (caritas), *amicitia* (friendship); or was it some of these things, or all of these things, or none of these things; or was it just pure fiction?

Despite the debates as to what courtly love was supposed to be, there however appeared to be a certain type of romantic engagement that flourished during the 12th century,<sup>129</sup> – or more broadly, that flourished in the Middle Ages – which is attested to by literature<sup>130</sup> at the time – in poems, ballads, love letters, entreaties, didactic writings, etc.; – and this type of *romance* can be characterised as courtly love.

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<sup>126</sup> Kenneth Northcott suggests that Eckhart adapted the secular language of the *Minnesang*, the poetry of courtly love. He writes: 'It was Eckhart, the Dominican, who a century after the period when the *Minnesang* flourished most spectacularly took this vocabulary and used it once more for the expression of the relationship of God to man .... Eckhart never leaves us in doubt that this secular love vocabulary has now been restored to a theological purpose, but has at the same time lost none of the meanings that had been accrued to it during its secular use.' See F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (1987), xiii-xiv.

<sup>127</sup> 'Love is an art with rules. Lovers take service in the army of Cupid. One cannot love one's own wife but must love the wife of some other man: so the affair must be secretive, and jealousy is an important part love'. John Parry, *Art of Courtly Love, Introduction* (Columbia, 1941), 6.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 184-186.

<sup>129</sup> 'Courtly love developed in the 12th century among the troubadours of southern France, spread and colored the literature of western Europe for centuries...'. Ibid. 3.

<sup>130</sup> E.g., Aelred of Rievaulx (c.1110-67) a Cistercian monk: In one of his works, *De spiritali amicitia* (On Spiritual Friendship), as in several others of his works, he insists among other things on chastity. There was also Chrétien de Troyes with his works like *King Mark and Iseult* or *Lancelot*, where courtly dalliances with their often tragic outcomes are poetised and romanticised. Then of course there were

Such a romantic affectation is to be found in both secular and sacred literature, and is to be found at court, as well as in the Church. That this particular form of romantic behaviour existed, showed that it was important to the societies then, and also showed that it was different from what had gone before it, or, at least, where it had existed before – say in Ovidian love poetry<sup>131</sup> – its reincarnation now in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century was notably<sup>132</sup> more different than it had been before.

Courtly love was not so named at the time that it was in vogue, and currency to it was only retrospectively given to these amorous actions, by Gaston Paris during the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Another characterisation for the terminology courtly love is ‘fin’ amor’ or ‘fine love’.<sup>133</sup> This is in contrast or even in opposition to ‘fals’ amor’, or mixed love which suggested sexual union.

Courtly love functioned as an antidote to marriage. That is, because marriage was not entered into for *love*, but was considered as a contractual arrangement often undertaken for social, political, business, familial, procreational, and for less than honourable reasons; that often, in these conjugal relationships there was an absence of affective, romantic or emotional feeling.<sup>134</sup> The woman was often seen as chattel and was the property of her ‘lord and master’.<sup>135</sup> In such a relationship, marriage was merely a legal and social obligation that was primarily intended to produce off-spring.

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important patrons of courtly literature like Duke William of Aquitaine (1071-1126) and his granddaughter Eleanor of Aquitaine (c.1123 – 1204), and her children at the Court of Poitiers.

<sup>131</sup> Love for Ovid was sensual; it had little or no trace of romantic affection of later times. It is extra-marital and does not contemplate marriage. Some of Ovid’s works are *Ars amatoria*; *Remedia amoris*, *Amours*, and they all deal with love. Parry’s *Introduction*, 3.

<sup>132</sup> For now men in the Middle Ages got the impression from Ovid that the best partner in a love affair is another man’s wife and now the heightened sense of danger, secrecy, risks, jealousy makes this type of love infinitely more pleasurable. Now, the ethos of courtly love was different from the Ovidian portrayal of love, because the 12th century lover and his paramour no longer played a game of mutual deceit, but she was now her lover’s feudal lord to whom he owed her allegiance. Her status was above his. See Parry’s *Introduction*. 6ff.

<sup>133</sup> June Hall McCash observes: ‘... Gaston Paris, more than a hundred years ago [1883] labelled [courtly love] *amour courtois*, [and] almost thirty years ago [1958] Maurice Valency referred to as “romantic love” ... and that in 1964, in an effort toward greater precision, Moshé Lazar, returning to troubadour terminology, called *fin’ amors* to designate this “nouvelle conception de l’amour”’. See *Mutual Love as a Medieval Ideal* (1980), 429.

<sup>134</sup> For instance, Ulrich von Lichtenstein (1200-1275), a *minnesinger* in his *Frauentienst* (Service to the Lady) poetry; fictionally and autobiographically details his chivalrous and honourable services rendered to married women according to the customs of chaste or courtly love. ‘Like other men of his class and time, Ulrich considered marriage a phase of feudal business-management, since it consisted basically of the joining of lands, the cementing of loyalties, and the production of heirs and future defenders [of family interests]’. See Morton Hunt, *A Natural History of Love* (Grove Press, N.Y. 1959), 137.

<sup>135</sup> Eric Fuchs, *Christianity and Sexuality: An Ambiguous History* (Seabury Press, New York, 1983).

So often in this arrangement, the woman was an unequal partner with the male. Courtly love challenged marital relationship for it recognised the woman as an individual.

In addition, courtly love is high love of ‘fin amors’,<sup>136</sup> and it is in stark contrast to ‘fals amors’ or mixed love (sexual union), the latter seen as a form of bestiality. Courtly love is love as purifying pain. It is pleasure derived from the idea of love or from the contemplation of love without actually its consummation. So Eros was elevated to a kind of Platonic *phileo*, or even to an Aristotelian *âreté*, or Ciceronian *amicitia*; thus, this transfiguration of erotic love into virtue was the bedrock of courtly love. The aestheticism of one of the important manifestations of courtly love was *affectation*, ‘desire’, flirtation, and a fanciful day-dreaming about the ‘beautiful’ lady at court by her adoring and sometimes besotted knight (or knights), where his love was more often than not, unrequited.

Courtly love entailed a degree of risk, danger and pleasure. Despite the controversy as to whether courtly love was *eros* or *caritas*, I will take the middle position, that, they were both,<sup>137</sup> i.e., some were erotic, and others platonic.

Likewise, there were types of courtly love that firstly started as erotic, but later became platonic; and others, started as platonic, but later became erotic. For instance, the story of Abelard and Heloise is one that started as amor, and later became caritas. In addition, there were other examples of courtly love, which started with no intention of being either romantic or caritas – the involvement started merely as duty to one’s

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<sup>136</sup> Stephen Jaeger in *Ennobling Love* says: ‘The age [12th century, or courtly love] needed the image of the two Venuses; it required distinctions between a “pure love” aimed at perfecting the lover and “mixed love” that permits sexual union ...); between “fin’ amours” and “fal’ amours”; between *minne* and *liebe*; between high love that raises a man to esteem and worthiness, and low love that reduces him to bestiality...’. *Creating the Thresholds of Innocence: Guilt, Conscience, Disgrace* (Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1999), 156.

<sup>137</sup> I make this assessment based on my reading of a couple important texts. These are, Betty Radice’s transl. of *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Chronology x, pp.73, 74, 121, 122, 125, 275,174, Penguin (1974); and also Sir Thomas Malory *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Vol.:

Book V111 – Ch. 24, pp.345-346.

Book X - Ch.88, p.187.

Book XV111 – Ch.2, p.375.

Book X1X – Ch. 7, p.438.

Book X1X – Ch. 9, p.445.

Book XX1 - Ch.9, p.523.

Book XX1 - Ch. 8, p.522.

Book XX1 – Ch.10, p.525.

Ed. Janet Cowen, Penguin Classics (1969).

superior – but the involvement between the couple, became romantic, e.g., Tristan and Isolde. Yet other courtly relationships started as platonic, became romantic, and then ended up being *caritas*, e.g., Lancelot and Genevieve.

Because couples involved in various kinds of arranged marriages decided to look for love – clearly, this love circumscribed by strict rules – outside arranged marriages, it was little wonder then, that the Frenchman, Andreas Capellanus, the twelfth century exponent of courtly love, and author of a pioneering treatise titled, *De amore* (About Love), in one of his so-called rules, or comments on love, could say: ‘Marriage is no real excuse for not loving’. Whatever Capellanus meant by this rule is unclear.

Perhaps he meant that although one is married because of convenience, and accompanying it the ‘feudalisation of love’, that still for all, there was no reason why there could not be love in such a relationship. He could also mean that although being married, that there was no reason not to have extra-marital affairs. He could also mean that courtly love or marriage was incompatible with mutual love. However, I think it is none of these things, and what he means was, that indeed, courtly love or marriage was compatible with mutual love. For as McCash says: ‘...there is a significant body of texts to suggest that it [mutual love] was for many ... the ultimate ideal, both within marriage and without’.<sup>138</sup>

Under Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 –1153), one of the pre-eminent Church Fathers of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the language of courtly love is used as a metaphor or a code for non-physical sexual contacts. Bernard co-opted the language of courtly love to show divine verities. His greatest emphasis was on love;<sup>139</sup> ultimately love for God. He was a consummate diplomat, politician, and ecclesiastical figure of the highest calibre; a theologian, and an abbot. Bernard was founder of the Cistercian Brotherhood. He

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<sup>138</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, says McCash ‘struck a new note about 1134 in his *De sacramentis christianae fidei*, which contains one of the most sympathetic portrayals of marriage ...’. *Mutual Love as a Medieval Ideal* in Busby & Kooper (1990), 430. Fuchs lends support to this view when he says: ‘According to Hugh, the origin of marriage, or what constitutes its foundations, is the bond between a man and a woman: marriage is first of all ... essentially a conjugal community’. *Christianity and Sexuality...* (1983), 123.

<sup>139</sup> See *De diligendo* (On Loving God) addressed Cardinal Aimeric, deacon (from 1121) and chancellor of Church of Rome (from 1126); and the *Letter on Love Written to the Holy Brothers of La Chartreuse*, around 1125. Transl. G.R Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux, Selected Works* (1987), 173-205.

inspired the faithful with his simple message of faith in God, love for Christ, and love for the Virgin Mary.

Rather than courtly love directed towards the service of eros – i.e., romantic and sexual love – and also, rather than platonic love directed solely towards worldly pursuits and interests, for Bernard, love is to be directed towards God. For instance, Bernard's treatise 'On Loving God' says: 'We are to love God for two reasons: 1. For Himself, because he deserves it; 2. It is for our own good'.<sup>140</sup>

Bernard goes on to offer specifics as to why we should love God. Because 'he provides bread, sun and air' – i.e. bodily necessities; but more than this, he provides higher goods for the soul – i.e. 'dignity', 'knowledge' and 'virtue'. According to Bernard, free will which comes with dignity sets man above the animals; knowledge is the realization that one possesses this knowledge; and, the recognition from where, and from whom knowledge comes; and virtue is: seeking for, and holding unto the Creator.<sup>141</sup>

For Bernard, courtly love is not what is important; or rather, courtly love now becomes 'uncourtly'. That is to say, courtly love, or romantic love is now transformed or transmuted into divine love, and makes God, the object of that love.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> G.R. Evans, Bernard Clairvaux, *Selected Works* (N.Y., 1987), 174.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 175-76. According to Bernard, real love or true love is divine, for he even sees the Trinity as one of love. He says, 'For what preserves the glorious and ineffable Unity of the blessed Trinity, except love? Charity, the law of the Lord, joins the Three Persons into the unity of the Godhead and unites the holy Trinity in the bond of peace'. Ibid. XII 35.

<sup>142</sup> Bernard details four degrees of love in his Sermon (These are paraphrased and summarised)

i. Carnal love: Man loves himself firstly out of self-interest, although this love is selfish, it is necessary, for one naturally has to love oneself. Naturally, to the extent that we are part of God's natural creation, and so as we love God's natural creation, because it's God's gift to us, so is our life – i.e., God's gift to us - thus for God's sake, we should love this life - ourselves. However, although man loves himself, he should not love himself excessively, because that would lead to 'voluptuousness' according to Bernard. In order to prevent voluptuousness – a kind of self-indulgence – self-love must be mediated by concern for others. Hence the Biblical injunction that, 'you love your neighbor as yourself.' However, a man can only love his neighbor as himself, if he loves God. 'You must first love God, so that in him you can love your neighbor too' (Mk 12:30-31) admonishes Bernard. Cf. G.R. Evans, *Bernard Clairvaux, Selected Works*, VIII 25 (N.Y. 1987).

ii. Pure love: 'Now a man cannot love his neighbor in God, except he loves God Himself; wherefore we must love God first, in order to love our neighbors in Him'. Once this is recognized it will not be hard to fulfill the commandment touching loving one's neighbor as oneself.

iii. Divine love: 'The third degree of love, we have now seen, is to love God on His own account, solely because He is God'. This kind of love seems to correspond to the love that the bride has for the bridegroom in the Song of Songs (or the church, or the soul's love for Christ). Here the soul attains the Beatific Vision. In short, one should love God without a 'Why' because says Bernard 'for he is both the efficient and final cause'. Ibid. VI. 22.

Now, for Bernard, loving God will entail some real actions and consequences. One of the actions is a renunciation of worldly ostentations. Likewise, having simple faith in the teachings of Christ is a demonstration of this divine love. So, one will divest oneself of scholastic philosophy – or human reasoning – and instead, if intellect is to be used, it must be used to promote, and support dependence on, and trust in divinely revealed truths. Such truths are truths because they have the time-honoured authentication of the Church. Such truths are heresy-free.

Very importantly too for Bernard is the replacement of the courtly ladies and their courtly manners; affected ideals, and stylised rules of romance, and misplaced notions and practices of love with real veneration for the Lady of all ladies, the Mother of all mothers – the Mother of God (*Theotokos*). So instead of devotions directed towards worldly courtiers, such veneration should be accorded to the Virgin Mary.

So for Bernard, people of courtly sensibilities – but not only them – but ‘uncourtly’ people<sup>143</sup> – as well; all of them should adopt proper affections towards the Virgin Mary. This then becomes an ennobling and democratising experience; that is to say, more people can obtain a greater sense of equality, belongingness, grace, and love for God; and, they in turn, can have a more propitious relationship with God through the intercessory work of Mary.

How? Because she now becoming the Lady *par excellence* is now the Mediatrix, the go-between, the in-between, and the interlocutor between the believer – all believers – and Christ. In fact, she now shares the co-redemptive work of Jesus. Bernard’s Mariology therefore, not only helps to apotheosise and feminise the Virgin Mary, but ironically, she is also sexualised.<sup>144</sup>

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iv. Perfected or transcendent love: This love may not be attainable in this life, but is certainly obtainable in the next world. For Bernard says, ‘Doubtless it will be reached when the good and faithful servant shall have entered into the joy of his Lord’. (Ibid. IX 28).

<sup>143</sup> These are described as comical and satirical characters who are influenced by Latin and classical satire. They are from non-courtly ranks, whose primary concerns are financial gain and sexual fulfillment. Their subject matter is the issues of everyday life, like hunger, poverty, sexual desire and financial ambition. See Leyla Rouhi, *The Go-Between in Medieval Latin Comedy* (Leiden, 1999), 85.

<sup>144</sup> It is said that, this sexual imagery (sexualisation of Mary) is seen for example, in a picture where, Bernard is receiving milk from the breast of the Virgin Mary. The scene is a legend that allegedly took place at Speyer Cathedral in 1146. See also Fr. Michael Morris’s article: ‘Based on one of the later legends of the great Cistercian Abbot Saint Bernard, he was reportedly praying one day in 1146 before a statue of the Virgin Mary in Speyer Cathedral. In his prayer he asked the Virgin to “Show that you are a mother...” (*Monstra te esse matrem*). The statue suddenly came alive and squirted milk on Bernard’s lips. In this mystical encounter Bernard becomes a spiritual son of Mary sharing a kinship with Christ who

Such theological and mystical ideas that Bernard expounded, sprang from pure love or divine love as far as he was concerned. This love came about when one abandoned oneself, surrendered oneself, and entered into union with God. This suffusion, infusion, and inclusion in God, a return to the One – this union<sup>145</sup> – contains some of the fissionable raw materials of Eckhart's theological, and metaphysical doctrines that he was to develop a hundred years later.

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was also nourished by Mary's milk'.

[www.dspt.edu/197810611143931273/cwp/view.asp?A=3&Q=276538&C=55913](http://www.dspt.edu/197810611143931273/cwp/view.asp?A=3&Q=276538&C=55913) [Accessed 24/10/2012].

<sup>145</sup> Bernard describes this union thus: 'As a drop of water seems to disappear completely in a quantity of wine, taking the wine's flavor and color; as red-hot iron becomes indistinguishable from the glow of the fire and its own original form disappears; as air suffused with the light of the sun seems transformed into the brightness of the light, as if it were light itself rather than merely lit up; so, in those who are holy, it is necessary for human affection to dissolve in some ineffable way, and be poured into the will of God'. Transl. Evans: *On Loving God*, 1X.28, *The Fourth Degree of Love*...., 196.



## Chapter Three: Courtly love and sexual imageries in Eckhart and Porete

Now, I would like to see whether this discourse on courtly love in Chapter 2.4 has coloured even if only indirectly the language and thinking of Eckhart. However, before we proceed with this line of enquiry, we need to introduce Marguerite Porete who is thought to reflect some of Eckhart's theology, or he, some of hers. She is a religious writer or poet who writes about Love, which she *feminises*,<sup>146</sup> and also *metaphysicises* by using the language of courtly love.<sup>147</sup>

Porete was an important, if tragic figure whom her adversaries<sup>148</sup> closely associated with the 'free-spirit' or the Beguine movement, a movement to which they

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<sup>146</sup> 'For at the heart of her [Porete] apparently negative theology is the supreme value of Love as the affirmative revelation of the feminine divine'. Maria Lichtmann, *Porete and Eckhart* (1994), 71.

<sup>147</sup> Lichtmann seems to think so in the case of Porete for she says: 'Marguerite's borrowing from the genre of troubadour lyric and courtly literature indicates that she wanted her book to reach a wide audience of both active and contemplative seekers and that as a true Beguine, she wanted to move her treatise on mystical love out into the world'. *Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart*, 72.

<sup>148</sup> For instance the Council of Vienne, 1311-1312 A.D in Article 28, decreed that: 'We entertain in our heart a deep longing that the catholic faith prosper in our time and that the perverseness of heresy be rooted out of Christian soil. We have therefore heard with great displeasure that an abominable sect of wicked men, commonly called Beghards, and of faithless women, commonly called Beguines, has sprung up in the realm of Germany. This sect, planted by the sower of evil deeds, holds and asserts in its sacrilegious and perverse doctrine the following errors:

1. First, that a person in this present life can acquire a degree of perfection which renders him utterly impeccable and unable to make further progress in grace. For, as they say, if someone could always make further progress, he could become more perfect than Christ.

2. Secondly, that it is not necessary to fast or pray after gaining this degree of perfection, for then the sensitive appetite has been so perfectly subjected to the spirit and to reason that one may freely grant the body whatever pleases it.

3. Thirdly, that those who have reached the said degree of perfection and spirit of liberty, are not subject to human obedience nor obliged to any commandments of the church, for, as they say, where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

4. Fourthly, that a person can gain in this life final beatitude in every degree of perfection that he will obtain in the life of the blessed.

5. Fifthly, that any intellectual nature in itself is naturally blessed, and that the soul does not need the light of glory to elevate it to see God and enjoy him blissfully.

6. Sixthly, that the practice of the virtues belongs to the state of imperfection and the perfect soul is free from virtues.

7. Seventhly, that to kiss a woman is a mortal sin since nature does not incline one to it, but the act of intercourse is not a sin, especially in time of temptation, since it is an inclination of nature.

8. Eighthly, that at the elevation of the body of Jesus Christ, they ought not to rise or show reverence to it; it would be an imperfection for them to come down from the purity and height of their contemplation so far as to think about the ministry or sacrament of the Eucharist, or about the passion of Christ as man'.

Paul Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis. Neerlandicae I* (Ghent, 1889-1906), 'Anno 1310,' pp. 63-65, #37-39; 155-60, #164-66.

were vehemently opposed. Although her accusers characterise her as a Beguine we do not have any definitive evidence that she herself thought that she was a Beguine.<sup>149</sup>

Moreover, according to Porete's complaint, Beguines seemed to have misunderstood or even criticized her by this statement: 'O my Lover, what will Beguines say and religious types, when they hear the excellence of your divine song? Beguines say I err, priests, clerics, and Preachers, Augustinians, Carmelites, and the Friars Minor...' (*Mirror*, Cap. 122).

However, if her name is still associated with the Beguine movement as scholars like Lichtmann and others seem to think, this is understandable in the light of her teachings. For as Lichtmann says: "Unlike earlier Beguines like Marie d' Oignies, Hadewijch of Antwerp, or Mechthild of Madgeburg, Marguerite saw her simple souls as having a teaching mission toward 'sainte église la petite,' ruled by reason rather than love. She realized that her vision of the mystical relation to God could develop only in the context of an external ecclesiastical order whose present hierarchy was inverted with the ['l église la grande'] 'Great Church' of God's lovers on top and the present hierarchy of the 'Lesser Church' subverted".<sup>150</sup>

The Beguine movement was a 12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries' set of female religious groups of an evangelical or proselytising nature.<sup>151</sup> The term beguine 'was ordinarily applied to women, both to those who lived together in a house called a beguinage, and to women who lived together as religious solitaires'.<sup>152</sup>

A religious and metaphysical strand of *free-thinking* whether part of the broader movement or as an idiosyncratic approach was summed up in Porete's Book *Mirouer*

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<sup>149</sup> Nothing is certainly known about the life of Marguerite Porete except from the records of the heresy trial that resulted in her death. Her accusers labeled her a beguine, but they meant it as an insult; we simply don't know whether she considered herself a beguine (one passage in her book places beguines among her critics). See <http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/porete.html>

<sup>150</sup> *Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart*, 69.

<sup>151</sup> 'Grassroots movement among 13th century German and Flemish women who took private vows of chastity and simplicity. These were the "beguines". Because they were not organized into religious orders and chose their own lifestyles, intending to live religiously, they were at times persecuted because they did not fit into any traditionally sanctioned pattern. But the movement persisted and was made up of tens of thousands of women. Eventually they built small convents for themselves and by the end of the 14th century there were 169 beguine convents in Cologne, the heart of the movement'. Fisher, 7th ed. (2008), 344.

<sup>152</sup> Babinsky, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Paulist Press (1993), 7.

*des simples ames* (Mirror of Simple Souls) composed, it is believed between 1296-1306.<sup>153</sup>

This book ‘could correctly be viewed as both a treatise and a kind of handbook designed to assist believers with their spiritual quest’.<sup>154</sup> Porete’s *Mirror* taught that ‘a soul annihilated in the love of the Creator could, and should, grant to nature all that it desires’. This sentence implies two heresies in the view of her critics, namely, *autotheism* and *antinomianism*; that is, not only can a soul become one with God, but in consequence of such a state, it can ignore the moral law. ‘This is commonly understood as the essence of the ‘Free-Spirit’ heresy’.<sup>155</sup>

It may be possible that Eckhart knew<sup>156</sup> of Porete or her teachings, and that Porete knew of Eckhart. If one of these possibilities is true, it is difficult to determine who influenced whom. Eckhart was a German Dominican friar and scholar; Porete was a French beguine and theologian. Both persons were contemporaries of each other, and Eckhart lived, studied, and taught in Paris during the late 1200s and early 1300s.

Eckhart lived from about 1260 to 1328, and while Porete’s time of birth is unknown, the time of her death is known, because she was burnt at the stake in June 1310. However, the circumstances noted above, and the nature and similarity of their discourse which we will later examine, offer circumstantial evidence that both scholars may have known each other, or at anyrate, knew, or heard something about each other’s teachings.<sup>157</sup> Be that as it may, we will not try to resolve the apparent irresolvable here – as to whom influenced whom – but will attempt to show the similarities, and the

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid. back cover page.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. *Introduction*, 27.

<sup>155</sup> Robert E. Lerner: *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1972).

<sup>156</sup> Lichtmann comments: ‘Now that the treatise [The Mirror of Simple Souls] has been rejoined to its author by the Italian scholar Romana Guarnieri, we can begin to assess the extraordinary verbal dependence and affinity of thought between Marguerite’s work and Meister Eckhart’s. Marguerite’s and Eckhart’s paths into the nothingness of God both converge and diverge .... While the divergence of their paths should be noted, it must be viewed in the light of the much greater convergence of mystical destiny’. See *The Mirror of Simple Souls Mirrored, in Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, 45.

<sup>157</sup> Bernard McGinn says: ‘The Meister never directly quoted a woman, nor could he have been expected to. Careful research has proven, however, that Eckhart had read (or had read to him) Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Not only a number of shared themes (e.g. freedom from the virtues, living without a why, annihilation of the created will, indistinct union, etc.), but even the verbal expression of these dangerous teachings in Pr. 52 [*Beati Pauperes Spiritu Quia Ipsorum Est Regnum Caelorum* (Matt. 5:3)] and elsewhere, indicate that this silent source had a real impact on Eckhart’. *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 181.

differences between these two metaphysicians, especially with regards to their sexual imageries.

### 3.1 Porete and Eckhart's steps *via* Augustine

To begin, what is certain about Porete and Eckhart is that they both draw on past and current theological and philosophical ideas that were part of the European intellectual tradition of their time, these intellectual ideas included, Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, Augustinian, Pseudo-Dionysian, Scholastic, and medieval courtly love thoughts and practices.

Now, in order to see the commonalities between Porete and Eckhart, we will examine a particular aspect of one of their concepts. This concept is based on the idea that a certain number of fixed steps or stages accompany the soul's spiritual journey towards divine union, and both Porete (but Eckhart with more significant departures) echo Augustine's seven steps of the *old man's* journey towards the *new man*.

Now, although Porete's stages shadow St. Augustine's seven stages, hers is still different from Augustine's<sup>158</sup> owing to her use of enigmatic, emblematic, mystical, polemic, and courtly language.<sup>159</sup> Some of this language will emerge as we proceed with this discussion. Eckhart on the other hand, of course, draws more directly on Augustine, but he accomplishes man's divinisation in only six steps, whereas Augustine does it in seven because he (Eckhart) compresses all of Augustine's seven steps into his first stage. The stages of Augustine, Porete, and Eckhart's are diagrammised and summarised below.

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<sup>158</sup> Augustine's language is more devotional, discursive even prescriptive. Whereas Porete's is more esoteric, gnostic, and a secret that is only known or revealed to the initiated.

<sup>159</sup> K. Emery commenting on *Margaret Porete and Her Book*, in his Foreword (xii) says: 'That Margaret read romantic literature is one of the few things about her that is demonstrable. The prologue of the *Mirror* is a kind of allegorical gloss on the widely popular *Romance of Alexander*. The authors [of *Ad nostrum*, the document that condemned her] show that Margaret read and understood well the *Romance of the Rose*, the meaning of which she redirected to her own ends .... The literary form of the *Mirror* – a prose dialogue spoken by allegorical personifications, interspersed with lyrics – was inspired by the *Romance*, and perhaps by some French translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Margaret was an accomplished lyricist: her verses display some of the finer techniques of courtly love style'. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Porete (Notre Dame, 1999).

### 3.2 Stages towards union

(These stages are given fuller expositions in narrative form below the chart)<sup>160</sup>

1) <b>Augustine</b> <sup>161</sup> (7 steps)	2) <b>Porete</b> (7 steps) <sup>162</sup>	3) <b>Eckhart</b> (6 steps) c.f. <i>The Nobleman</i> <sup>163</sup>
1. (a) Earthly man – body (b) Spiritual man – soul (dualistic man)	1. Soul: Touched by God's grace. Stripped bare of sin. Keeps God's commandments	1. Infant stumbles. Needs lactation. New/inner man looks to others as religious role models
2. Gives up what is human; moves to God	2. Soul loves not because of commands; but loves for Love's sake. Despises riches, delights, honors	2. Seeking own path; Recognising God for himself

<sup>160</sup> See also a forthcoming study by M. Vinzent, 'Bildsequenzen der Individualisierungsstufen des Menschen bei Augustinus, Meister Eckhart und Margaret Porete' (*Eckhart Jahrbuch*).

<sup>161</sup> Augustine, *De vera religione* 26, 49. Seven steps' synopsis:

- 1) The first stage is reached when man seems to live at his mother's breast
- 2) The second when this man gives up what is human and moves up towards God, when he leaves behind human authority and uses the steps of his mind moving up towards the highest and unchanging law
- 3) The third when he becomes more daring, masters his fleshly impulses and is no longer forced to sin by marrying his soul to his mind, even if tempted
- 4) At stage four, he is reinforced to stand all trials
- 5) At stage five, peace starts and there is full satisfaction where one lives in full abundance of unchanging and unutterable richness
- 6) At stage six, the complete change into eternal life takes place where man forgets about the temporal life and gains his full form, created in the image of God
- 7) At stage seven he finds eternal peace and lasting beatitude where there are no further stages to come. As death is the goal of the old man, eternal life is the one for the new one. Latin text below:

[primam] Iste dicitur novus homo et interior et caelestis, habens et ipse proportionem non annis sed provecibus distinctas quasdam spiritalis aetates suas: primam in uberibus utilis historiae, quae nutrit exemplis,

secundam iam obviscentem humana et ad divina tendentem, in qua non auctoritatis humanae continetur sinu, sed ad summam et incommutabilem legem passibus rationis innititur,

tertiam iam fidentiore et carnalem appetitum rationis robore maritantes gaudentesque intrinsecus in quadam dulcedine coniugali, cum anima menti copulatur et velamento pudoris obnubitur, ut iam recte vivere non cogatur, sed etiamsi omnes concedant, peccare non libeat,

quartam iam id ipsum multo firmiter ordinatiusque facientem et emicantem in virum perfectum atque aptam et idoneam omnibus et persecutionibus et mundi huius tempestatibus ac fluctibus sustinendis atque frangendis,

quintam pacatam atque omni ex parte tranquillam, viventem in opibus et abundantia incommutabilis regni summae atque ineffabilis sapientiae,

seta omnimodae mutationis in aeternam vitam et usque ad totam oblivionem vitae temporalis transeuntem, perfecta forma quae facta est ad imaginem et similitudinem dei,

septima enim iam quies aeterna est et nullis aetatibus distinguenda beatitudo perpetua. Ut enim finis veteris hominis mors est, sic finis novi hominis vita aeterna

<sup>162</sup> *Mirror*. Transl. B. McGinn *et al* (1999), 140-146.

<sup>163</sup> Bd. V: Meister Eckharts Traktate: Liber Benedictus, II. *Von dem edeln menschen*, Josef Quint, 1963.

3. Controls carnal desires; marries soul to mind	3. Soul: Loves and practices virtues such as goodness. Crushes one's will by 'hacking and hewing away of oneself'	3. Virtuous: Loves God firstly then loves fellowman secondly. God's will is soul's will
4. Withstands all trials	4. Soul: Contemplation; joyous union although not yet complete. Free from outward labors and obedience to another.	4. Detachment; imperviousness; Stoic indifference
5. Enjoyment of peace; full abundance of unchanging and unutterable riches	5. Soul: (i) Recognises the completeness of God as Being and (ii) her nothingness. Love must descend into the abyss. It must abandon free-will and return it to God.	5. Serenity in God Contentment
6. Eternal life now; reflects image of God	6. Soul does not see herself neither does she see God. But God sees himself in her. Soul is made free of all things, and becomes pure and illumined; but not yet glorified	6. Divine Image. Union
7. Eternal bliss in next life	7. Complete union 'when the soul shalt have left our bodies'.	

To begin, Porete and Eckhart share with Augustine (354-430 CE) the notion of an ascending ladder or spiritual progress towards perfection and union with God. But in all this, it should be noted that this type of itinerary, using a spiritual ladder, was not unknown in previous times, and for example, in the Old Testament (cf. Jacob's ladder, Gen.28:10–19), this analogy – of climbing a ladder consisting of several rungs to divine perfection – came *via* the Patristic periods into the Scholastic and medieval epochs in which Porete and Eckhart lived; and, both of them effectively used this typology to map

out the soul's path towards mystical union with the Divine. The key however towards this ultimate goal – of divine union – in the case of Augustine, is an ascetic-like upward journey of the fallen man of body and soul; for Porete, the soul has to descend into nothingness; and for Eckhart, the 'awakened' inner man is upwardly mobile. So all three commentators are agreed on a common path consisting of varying platforms of rigour which ultimately leads up to the soul's tumescence.

In the case of Augustine, his goal towards divine perfection is blighted by sexuality or infected as it were with lust or concupiscence; for, at the outset of the journey, man starts with the composite lustful body with its concupiscent will, and a soul that is stirring towards the divine. For Porete, on the other hand, the soul's commencement point is where it is already 'touched by grace and stripped of sin', and is heading towards abnegation as it descends into nothingness, or where *anéantissement*<sup>164</sup> (annihilation)<sup>165</sup> has to be experienced. While for Eckhart the old man has already given way to the new inner man who 'becomes more daring, masters his fleshly impulses and is no longer forced to sin by marrying his soul to his mind, even if tempted'.

As I have already indicated, Augustine, Porete, and Eckhart all share the notion of an ascending ladder towards spiritual perfection, but it must also be noted that the theological interpretations and the metaphysical outcomes of the steps of each commentator are different from each other's, and thus they achieve their ultimate goal by different routes.

For instance, Porete, unlike Augustine does not see the soul's quest for divine union so much laden down with 'guilt' for already at her stage one, the soul is 'stripped bare of sin'; although, we must add, that for Porete there are hardships which accompany the spirit in its attempt to subdue the body, and these hardships are evident right up until her stage 3. For Porete tells that '... it is harder to conquer the works

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<sup>164</sup> For as Maria Lichtmann comments: 'Marguerite's entire treatise is in the form of a dialogue primarily between Love and the Soul, *Amour* and *Ame*. The response to this Love is an increasing clarification and simplification, the soul's *anéantissement*, its annihilation'. *Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart*, 75.

<sup>165</sup> This type of annihilation parallels the type that is exposed by the Sufi mystic Rabi'a (c.713-80). She, as a famous mystic of Iraq scorned a rich man's offer of marriage saying that she did not want to be distracted for a moment from God. All her attention was placed on her Beloved, which became a favorite Sufi name for God. In absolute devotion, the lover desires 'fana'. This is, total annihilation in the Beloved. (See Fisher, 402).

which the spirit wills than it is to conquer the body's will and to do the will of the spirit. So one must crush oneself, hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be, burdening oneself down with several states of being, so as to unburden oneself and to attain to one's being'.<sup>166</sup> So clearly for Porete, the body is still a burden to carry about, for it 'burdens down itself with several states of being'.<sup>167</sup> But ironically, it does this so as to become unburdened from those earlier states (stages 1-2) in order for it to attain to one's being'; this is to the 4<sup>th</sup> state 'where the soul is drawn up by the exaltation of Love'.<sup>168</sup>

However even at stage 4, the body, for Porete is still very much in evidence, and as such she has more in common with Augustine, as both of them see the old man or the soul in the old man respectively, as exerting an undue amount of physical, mental and spiritual influence by placing road blocks – sexual desires and temptations – in the way of the soul's progress to divine union.

This is true also for Augustine, for it is only at his 7<sup>th</sup> stage that the soul can finally reach its first plateau of contentment in God; whereas, for Eckhart by stage 3, God already takes over the new man and 'establishes and leads him in joy, sweetness and bliss'.<sup>169</sup> For at this third stage Eckhart confidently exclaims: '... we increasingly withdraw from our mother, removing ourselves more and more from her lap, shedding concern and fear so that even if it were in our power to inflict evil and injustice on all people without difficulty, we would not desire to do so, since through our love we are so bound to God with love in eagerness...'.<sup>170</sup>

So along with Eckhart's notions of justice, goodness, and love for God, the act of withdrawal from our mother or the cutting of the umbilical cord between us and her is crucial for Eckhart; for this type of physical intimacy and comfort that the new man once enjoyed on his mother's lap – lap suggests an emotional and even a sexual attachment – this intimacy is now elevated and transformed into 'joy, sweetness and

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<sup>166</sup> *Mirror*, Colledge, Marler *et al*, 142.

<sup>167</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>168</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>169</sup> DW5 (Mod. Gr. transl.) Meister Eckharts Traktate 1: Liber Benedictus II. *Von dem edlen menschen*; '...ihn setzt und führt in Freude und in Süßigkeit und Seligkeit...'. Josef Quint (1963) [para.2 lns. 5-6], 500. See also M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 108.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* [para.2 lns. 1-5], 500. See also M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 107-108.



blessedness', an expression of eroticism, which in terms of literary imagery has lost none of its bodily associations.

Eckhart's new or inner man, in contrast to Augustine's old man is not hampered by the body because 'he does not combine sin with sexuality; and, where the body and lust are mentioned, they apply to matter in general and never specifically to sexual lust'<sup>171</sup> and, Eckhart's inner man unlike Porete's soul does not suffer from the duality of body and spirit; or more *apropos*, for Eckhart, the body/soul dichotomy has been resolved, and they are no longer at war with each other, because lust and sex are no longer bedevilled by personal or individual notions of disobedience, guilt and shame because it is now the heavenly man or the new man who is in the driving seat. Thus the sexual anxiety of Augustine or the bodily travails of Porete do not feature in Eckhart's six stages.

A further observation is helpful here, and it is that whereas Porete's steps more closely mirror Augustine's, and whereas her steps also incorporate elements of Eckhart's, the outcome of Eckhart's steps are radically different from Augustine and Porete's. I will later examine in more details these different steps and see what sexual imageries they yield.

### 3.3 Courtly love in Augustine, Porete and Eckhart's steps

In talking about the seven-step plans of Augustine, Porete and Eckhart, I am really intending to see if, and how much of the spirit and practice of courtly love is reflected in their steps; and so, firstly, I will make a brief comment on Augustine's steps; however, my main interest here is really Porete and Eckhart; but, I am compelled to draw at first, attention to Augustine because his seven-step ladder is one of the guiding principles that the other two commentators – Porete and Eckhart – used in developing their own model of salvation.

Now, what is called courtly love or *fine amor* would in the first place not feature in Augustine's steps because *fine amor* was a medieval phenomenon that fictionalised love, and *fine amor* functioned as a kind of *dramaturgy* giving vicarious pleasure and/or

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<sup>171</sup> 'Am bemerkenswertesten ist wohl das vollständige Fehlen jeglichen Verweises auf die Verbindung von Sünde und Sexualität, wo vom Fleisch und der Wollust die Rede ist, meint er immer allgemein die Materie, nie speziell die sexuelle Lust'. Th. Heimerl, *Frauenmystik — Männermystik?* (2002) 76-82, 76.

suffering to those infatuated and inflamed with erotic feelings which were polished into idealised states of *perfect love*, *noble love* or some other glowing description.

Augustine's seven-step plan on the other hand, is not in this secular vein, but his is more akin to an asceticism enunciated in the Bible, where we are commanded to love God and our fellowman, but where this love can only come about by divine grace. So Augustine's love is *de-eroticised* – is not carnal – it does not involve *eros*; but, it is the love of God given by the Holy Spirit. In *Enchiridion* he writes about the battle between love and the flesh:

... the mightier power of love struggles against the power of the flesh. And although there is still in man a power that fights against him – his infirmity being not yet fully healed – yet he [the righteous man] lives by faith and lives righteously in so far as he does not yield to evil desires, conquering them by his love of righteousness.<sup>172</sup>

Augustine's love then becomes a *redemptive* love, where the old man needs a 'complete mutation into eternal life' to become the 'new, inner and heavenly man'. For Augustine, this detachment gradually takes place through the six stages only on the basis of a fundamental dualism between the outer and the inner man; and at the end, we are faced with the sharp opposition between the 'end of the old man' which is 'death' and the 'end/goal of the new man' which is 'eternal life'.<sup>173</sup>

Augustine's steps, in contrast to Porete and Eckhart's, are not as dynamic as theirs, if only because his plan carries with it as I have already suggested, the old baggage of lust<sup>174</sup> and passion<sup>175</sup> because it is the journey of the *old man* towards the divine; and although assisted by grace, it is still a tortured journey, right up until Augustine's third step<sup>176</sup> where the old-man and the *would-be* new man are still

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<sup>172</sup> Augustine, Love, *Enchiridion*, 118.

<sup>173</sup> M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 106-113.

<sup>174</sup> 'From this state, after he had sinned, man was banished, and through his sin he subjected his descendants to the punishment of sin and damnation, for he had radically corrupted them, in himself, by his sinning. As a consequence of this, all those descended from him and his wife (who had prompted him to sin and who was condemned along with him at the same time) - all those born through carnal lust, on whom the same penalty is visited as for disobedience - all these entered into the inheritance of original sin'. 'Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope, and Love', Chap. VIII. 26, *The Plight of Man After the Fall*.

<sup>175</sup> 'The Fall then, introduced disobedient flesh to disobedient humanity, and Augustine defined this disobedience of the flesh as lust. Since for Augustine this was brought into being at the Fall - Augustine vindicated sexuality, but lust or passion remained unnatural'. Salisbury *Augustine Sexual Revolution*, 43.

<sup>176</sup> 'Augustine devotes some time on the third stage and concentrates on fleshly sins, on temptation and on the mastering of those [things]...'. See M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 117-165.

handicapped by a dualistic *angst* – e.g. passion *versus* reason, soul *versus* body, sex and lust *versus* caritas.

However, for Porete, the soul at the first stage of her journey, as we have discussed, is already: ‘Touched by God’s grace. Stripped bare of sin. Keeps God’s commandments’. Porete’s soul is *less* laden-down with sexual anxieties or any other form of *bodily* anxieties as is Augustine’s old man, as the language already suggests.

For Porete, union with God is imagined as a gradual sexual encounter between an embodied soul and God who is like a stimulating *lesbian* lover. This feminine *Gratia* (goddess of love), not only touches the soul, and it is not the forbidden ‘noli me tangere’ command; not a seemingly contradictory latent sexual desire, where ‘No’ really means ‘Yes’; where the No/Yes equivocation is like that in St. Augustine’s *Confessions* when he says: *da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo* (give me chastity and continence, but not yet).

Rather, Porete’s soul envisages a forceful act of divine coition when the soul ‘stripped bare’ stands naked in front of *Gratia*. But this intense sexualised language involving *touching* and *stripping* is a cry not merely for the soul to be rid ‘of sin’ so as to keep ‘God’s commandments’; it is more a powerful, efficacious and salvific desire for the soul to be locked in divine embrace with her lover.

These fluid contrasting language styles shown here reveal the tension between the sensuous and the virtuous; the physical and the spiritual: and these sexual motifs in the case of Porete, consciously serve as a bridge to span the chasm between the Augustinian body/soul divide. In other words, for Augustine, sexuality must be *sanitised* and become *divinised* if we are to attain to divine union, but for Porete, sexuality even if idealised is the way to the Divine.

Throughout Porete’s seven-stages, she speaks about the ‘overpowering’ force of Love which occupies all her heart. However, this is not an overpowering force which undermines the soul, but it is an empowering and liberating force where for the first time, the soul ‘finds itself’; and, where it can state: ‘I was this’ – a retrospective view that does not negate what it had been before – but where now, the soul acknowledges that she has been found worthy of God’s *touching* and *stripping* Love.

Because of this discovery, the soul is encouraged and emboldened to accept herself and engage with God irrespective of all her shortcomings, and thus she can now at stage two boldly asserts that: ‘... the creature abandons himself, and strains to act beyond the counsels of men in mortifying nature, in despising riches, delights and honors, to achieve the perfection of the evangelical counsels of which Jesus Christ is the exemplar. So she does not fear loss of possessions, nor men’s words, nor feebleness of body, for her beloved did not fear them, nor can any Soul who has been overwhelmed by him’.<sup>177</sup> Porete’s soul then has only one desire, and that is to be totally consumed by Love, and to sink into *nothingness*, and then to arise like a phoenix from the ashes of the soul’s immolation into the flames of Love.

Porete’s steps 2- 6 imply the soul’s struggle to be disengaged from bodily and sensual pleasures. This struggle or asceticism to attain virtues such as goodness requires that the Soul crushes her will by ‘hacking and hewing away at oneself’.<sup>178</sup> So for Porete, although the body is shadowing the soul in its search for spiritual union, it is not however, an unnecessary hindrance to the soul’s spiritual progress as the body would be a humbug to the soul in Augustine’s model. For his body/soul division and its attendant sexual tensions are only partially resolved at a relatively late stage, his 4<sup>th</sup> step, when only by then, is the new man now able to ‘withstand all trials and temptations’. Later, I will re-visit Porete’s stages in relationship to Eckhart’s and make some further comments on them.

Eckhart’s six steps do not, as they do in Augustine’s case herald the demise and rejection of the old man; they do not rely on the fundamental dualism between body and mind, soul or will. Nor do his steps display any interest in the opposition between desire, sex, and the ascetic withdrawal from the world. They do not create a divide between this world and heaven, nor do they show a split between immanency and transcendence, but they from the very start focus on the single goal of developing what is always present and incorruptible in humans. Eckhart’s steps is about growing and propagating the ‘seed’ of God which when nourished grows into the fruit-bearing tree according to its nature; and Porete’s steps, in some ways not dissimilar to Eckhart’s, involve the soul being ‘uplifted and stupefied in a union with the divine’.

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<sup>177</sup> *Mirror*, Caps. 118, 141.

<sup>178</sup> *Op cit*, 141-42.

### 3.4 Sexual imageries in Augustine, Porete, and Eckhart's steps

First, Augustine's sexual imageries in his steps are very palpable for as we have seen, lust accompanying sex is a *problem* because lust defies will. Augustine would wish for sex to be amenable to the will, to the same extent that raising our hand to the mouth to eat or drink is amenable to the will. This action is voluntary unlike the sexual ones which for Augustine are involuntary.

Particularly troubling for Augustine was the involuntary excitation of sexual organs, particular penile erection, because such a spontaneous act, something beyond will's control, smacked of bestiality; and, as such, acts like these driven by lust are antithetical to reason. Anything thus contrary to reason is inimical to good order and thus a rebellion against God as far as Augustine is concerned.<sup>179</sup>

In his *Enchiridion* he compares the four states of the Christian life with the four states of the Church's<sup>180</sup> life. He says: 'When, sunk in the darkest depths of ignorance, man lives according to the flesh, undisturbed by any struggle of reason or conscience, this is his first state'. 'But' he says about stage 3, 'if God has regard to him, and inspires him with faith in God's help, and the Spirit of God begins to work in him, then the mightier power of love strives against the power of the flesh; and although there is still in the man's own nature a power that fights against him (for his disease is not completely cured), yet he lives the life of the just by faith, and lives in righteousness so far as he does not yield to evil lust, but conquers it by the love of holiness'.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> '... Well, then, how significant is the fact that the eyes, and lips, and tongue, and hands, and feet, and the bending of back, and neck, and sides, are all placed within our power - to be applied to such operations as are suitable to them, when we have a body free from impediments and in a sound state of health; but when it must come to man's great function of the procreation of children the members which were expressly created for this purpose will not obey the direction of the will, but lust has to be waited for to set these members in motion, as if it had legal right over them, and sometimes it refuses to act when the mind wills, while often it acts against its will! Must not this bring the blush of shame over the freedom of the human will, that by its contempt of God, its own Commander, it has lost all proper command for itself over its own members? ... This, then, was the reason why the first human pair, on experiencing in the flesh that motion which was indecent because disobedient, and on feeling the shame of their nakedness, covered these offending members with fig-leaves; in order that, at the very least, by the will of the ashamed offenders, a veil might be thrown over that which was put into motion without the will of those who wished it: and since shame arose from what indecently pleased, decency might be attained by concealment'. *St. Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, Book I, Cap. 7 (transl. Schaff).

<sup>180</sup> (i) before the law, (ii) under the law, (iii) under grace, (iv) full and perfect peace.

<sup>181</sup> 'A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Vol. 3'. *Augustin on the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*.

So sexuality is a pre-occupation of Augustine's, and the deleterious effects of it are to be mitigated for example, by the institution of marriage, and by fulfilling the command to 'multiply and replenish'.<sup>182</sup>

Mottier to amplify this point says that 'Augustine, one of the founding Fathers of Western Christianity ... [who] developed the influential doctrine of "original sin" ... presented sex as the cause of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Augustine declared that sexual intercourse in paradise would have taken the form of "a gentle falling asleep in the partner's arms" had Adam and Eve not fallen prey to carnal desire, and that "lustful sex is the enemy of God"'.<sup>183</sup> However, in Augustine's view sex without lust is however only possible by the gift of faith, and only by the love of holiness can lust be conquered.

In contrast, as noted, Porete has some very suggestive sexual imageries in her steps. For instance, words like *touched* and *stripped bare* although intended to be salvific indicators, are by their very graphic nature suggestive of a heightened sense of sexuality. Similarly, we see Eckhart using the word *touch* when in *Homily* 10 he says:

In this first touch, when God touched the soul, and touching means uncreated and uncreaturely, the soul in the touch of God is as noble as God himself. God touches her as he is.<sup>184</sup> Here for him the soul which has received a kiss of the Godhead is absolutely thrilled being embraced by unity and intimacy.

Likewise, he says: 'Therefore, strip God of all His clothing – seize Him naked in his robing-room, where He is uncovered and bare in Himself. *Then* you will "abide in Him"'.<sup>185</sup>

This is still yet a more radical approach to sexuality and the divine from Porete's approach, for she sees *touching* and *stripping* as more genteel and courtly dalliances, where God's 'lust' is discreetly and furtively unmasked; but not so for Eckhart; his

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<sup>182</sup> In *De bono conjugali*, sexual intercourse is to be performed for the purpose of generation and Augustine says when this intention is fulfilled it is a good act. However, intercourse other than for procreation is sinful. Stressing that intercourse has to be confined to marriage he further adds: 'In marriage, intercourse for the purpose of generation has no fault attached to it, but for the purpose of satisfying concupiscence, provided with a spouse, because of the marriage fidelity, it is a venial sin; adultery or fornication, however, is a mortal sin. And so continence from all intercourse is certainly better than marital intercourse itself which takes place for the sake of begetting children'.

<sup>183</sup> Veronique Mottier, *Sexuality, A Very Short Introduction*, 19.

<sup>184</sup> DWI, Eckhart, *Pr.* 10,172, 6-173, 1: 'In dem êrsten berüerenne, dâ got die sêle berüeret hât und berüerende ist ungeschaffen und ungeschepflich, dâ ist diu sêle als edel als got selber ist nâch der berüerunge gotes. Got berüeret sie nâch im selber' (transl. M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* [2011], 44).

<sup>185</sup> LW II *Pr.* 40, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 118.

*touching, stripping, seizing* is something more assertive or aggressive, because *bareness* for Eckhart, now becomes a self-exhibitionist marker of God himself.

Such then is the ecstasy of the union between God and the soul as far as Eckhart is concerned that this union leads to ‘bliss, sweetness and joy’, where the soul mirrors a God who has stripped himself of all His clothing. God cannot even wait for the bed in the bride’s chamber, but asked to be seized ‘in his robing-room’. Aroused with a passion that cannot be contained, delayed, or denied; he does not need the privacy of the bedchamber, for the robing-room – the romantic *locus* – provides enough, the privacy and intimacy that are needed between him and the soul. It is here in his dressing room where *being* means copulation and conception.

Here, is where the soul is in God, and God is in the soul; here is where the Son is born in the soul, and in reciprocation, the soul is conceived back into the bosom of God. This intimacy speaks also of *annihilation* or becoming one with God, and as such, Eckhart’s erotic language is reminiscent of a Sufi mystic, the 9th CE Persian Abu Yazid al-Bistami who in his desire to be annihilated in God; so lost himself, that he is said to have uttered pronouncements such as: ‘Under my garments there is nothing but God’.<sup>186</sup>

Another telling expression of Porete’s is when she comments on the mandate about the soul being ‘commanded to love God with all her heart and her neighbor also as herself’. About this she says: ‘This seems to this Soul to be labor enough for her ... and it seems to her that if she were to live a thousand years, that it would take her all her might to keep and observe the commandments’.<sup>187</sup> This expression ‘labor’ is a metaphor that signifies on one hand Porete’s struggle with institutional religion with its adherence to the letter of the law rather than to the spirit of the law; her contempt for the Church’s preference for reason rather than for love: these she finds oppressive and unsatisfying.

So love for such religious institutional personnel and practices cannot be commanded or demanded. On the other hand, ‘labor’, is a *sexual* metaphor; for, ‘labor’ as in parturition tells how unsatisfying it is to (a) bring forth a child into the world when compelled to do so in the absence of love, and (b) how painful and burdensome is a sexual union in the absence of love. Porete sees these types of love all but impossible,

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<sup>186</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnawi-i ma’nawi*, ed. and transl. by Reynold A. Nicholson (London, 1925-40), vol. 4, ln. 2102. Quoted in Fisher (402).

<sup>187</sup> *Mirror*, McGinn, Marler *et al*, Caps. 118, 141.

and not in a thousand years could the soul keep these commandments to love. Porete wants a love that is not forced, but a love where, 'He is fullness, and by this am I impregnated. This is the divine seed and Loyal Love'. (*Mirror*, Cap.122).

### 3.5 Porete and Eckhart: Theological, metaphysical, and sexual points of contact

For Eckhart and Porete the ascent to Union is by dying to self or mortifying oneself. In the Christian experience, the iconic or defining archetypal symbol of the socialisation, domestication, and the demystification of death, is the mythic account of the death of God by Crucifixion. So by the Crucifixion-of-God saga and *kenosis*, all may derive comfort from it, that when we die, preferably, for a noble cause – be it God, king, country, family, or for some other abstract concept – that such a death is not in vain; that the sacrifice for a 'noble' cause is not wasted because it has been sanctioned, and given the seal of divine approval.

I have used this somewhat funereal excursus above as an introduction to Marguerite Porete, and also as an exemplum of the theology of dying; for here is this *Beguine* who rather than recant her views, preferred, instead, to endure the ravishes of the flames. For she, no doubt believed that she held an incomparable divine truth about grace which neither sword, water, fire, or rack could persuade her to abandon. She abandoned everything else, even her own life, for the non-abandonment of her *visio de paradisio*.

It comes then as no wonder, that Porete should invoke the imagery of *Annihilation*; the metaphors of three deaths – as if one death were not enough – and use others figures of speech like *lost souls* and *sad souls* elsewhere in the *Mirror* to show the seriousness of the path towards one's personal salvation. Clearly, here was someone feeling the weight of the world upon her, and she perhaps, saw herself in the role of a 'new messiah', yet again called upon to sacrifice herself for the salvation of something, or some cause; and, she seemed to have magnanimously, gladly, and unflinchingly bore her martyrdom.<sup>188</sup> So then, although her religious, spiritual, theological teachings, and

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<sup>188</sup> However, I am mindful of E. Colledge's remarks about Porete when he cites Robert Lerner's work *Heresy of the Free*, p. 208, who says: '...Margaret's intolerance of criticism... and her apparent cloistered way of life helped to bring about her own ruin. She fell victim to the barbarity of the age, to her persecutors' cruelty, and to her own stubborn courage. She died for what she believed to be true, and for



*God-talk* are infused with eulogic, epitaphic, and funereal language, they are not morbid or brooding, but her teachings are lyrical, poetic, didactic, mystical, hopeful, inspiring, loving, and divine.

As has been remarked before, although we cannot say with any definite certainty who influenced whom – whether Eckhart influenced Porete or she influenced him – what seems evident is that each of them has themes that are held in common. I will take and contrast one of these common themes that form the crux of their instructions. Their common and most important themes are, in the case of Eckhart: *Detachment*, and *The Birth of the Son in the Soul*, and for Porete, *Annihilation* and *The Image of the Trinity in the Soul*.

Below is a chart of some of Eckhart and Porete's ideas about achieving divine union. These ideas which I have summarised and compressed are set side-by-side for contrast and comparison.

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that we must honor her'. Cf. *The mirror of simple souls* / Margaret Porete; translated from the French with an introductory interpretative essay Edmund Colledge *et al* (Notre Dame, 1999), lxxxvii, 209.

<b>Eckhart</b> (how to achieve divine union)	<b>Porete</b> (how to achieve divine union)
<p>Eckhart tells us that: “After a thorough study of these writings [pagan masters, the prophets, Old and New Testaments] I find, as well as my reason can testify or perceive, that only pure detachment surpasses all things, for all virtues have some regard to creatures, but detachment is free of all creatures”.<sup>189</sup> Aspects of detachment:</p> <p><b>1. Detachment</b></p> <p>This is allied to abandonment, and it is in opposition to having attachment and will. Detachment is so uncanny that it is captured by the world ‘suddenly’. For <i>Predigt</i> 69, says: “A little while, a short while, and suddenly you will not see me” (John 16:16).<sup>190</sup></p> <p><b>2. Detachment is made possible</b> by intellect, or the Holy Spirit.</p> <p><b>3. Full detachment occurring</b><sup>191</sup> ‘If the soul were wholly stripped and denuded of all means, God would appear stripped and bare before Her and would give Himself wholly to her ...’.<sup>192</sup></p> <p><b>4. State of the detached soul: Turbulent</b></p> <p>Eckhart employs very physical and erotic language, e.g., rob, kill, stripped, bare, gives Himself wholly to her, etc., to show</p>	<p>In a dialogue between themselves, Love tells Reason (these characters are personified) that before the Soul can enter the life of the Divine (Stage 5) or enter into relationship with her Lover, that several things have to occur. These include for example, the following:</p> <p><b>1. Annihilation</b></p> <p>That is where the Soul has no more will; and where it has to remain after the work of the ‘Ravishing Farnearness’. This term is a description for the movement of the Holy Spirit; otherwise, called a ‘spark in-the-manner-of-an-aperture-and quick-closure’.</p> <p><b>2. Detachment is made possible</b> by Love or the Holy Spirit.</p> <p><b>3. Full annihilation occurring</b> in the Soul, when there is a sudden eruption, and movement of the spark, even though the Soul is unaware of it. This sudden movement transports the Soul to the realm of the 6th stage where it may remain only momentarily.</p> <p><b>4. State of the annihilated soul: Serene</b></p> <p>The climax of the 6th stage subsides, and the soul returns to the stage 5 where it is naturally inclined to be – in the annihilated state. However although it cannot</p>

<sup>189</sup> DW5.Traktat 1, *Von Abgeschiedenheit*, (para.1/Ins.8-12. p. 539). transl. Walshe, *On Detachment*, Meister Eckhart *Sermons & Treatises*, Vol.111, Element, UK. (1998),117.

<sup>190</sup> DW3, *Pr.* 69, 'Über ein kleines oder ein wenig, und alsbald werdet ihr mich nicht sehen' <Joh. 16,16> Josef Quint, (1976) 535/160. C.f. transl. Walshe, vol.1, 293.

<sup>191</sup> DW3, *Pr.* 69, "Wenn man es Gott nähme, die Seele zu lieben, so nähme man ihm sein Leben und sein Sein, oder man tötete Gott, wofern man so etwas sagen dürfte; denn eben jene gleiche Liebe, mit der Gott die Seele liebt, die ist sein Leben, und in derselben Liebe blüht der Heilige Geist aus, und diese gleiche Liebe ist der Heilige Geist. Da nun Gott die Seele so stark liebt, so muß die Seele etwas entsprechend Großes sein". Josef Quint (1976) 536/164. Also see Walshe, *Sermons & Treatises* (1998), vol.1, 294.

<sup>192</sup> Op. cit. Also see Walshe vol.1, 295.

<p>the intensity of the divine longing and yearning for union with the soul.</p> <p><b>5. Nature of the soul</b> (five states)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Becomes detached from the here and now</li> <li>2. It is like nothing</li> <li>3. It is pure and uncompounded</li> <li>4. It is active and seeking itself</li> <li>5. It is an image of God</li> </ol> <p><b>6. The soul's spiritual progress</b></p> <p>Intellect trumps its sister will. 'The latter is satisfied with God as He is good. But intellect strips all this off ... enters and breaks through to the roots where the Son wells up and the Holy Ghost blossoms forth ...'.<sup>193</sup></p> <p><b>7. Erotica-spiritual desires of the soul</b></p> <p>Eckhart's teases us with sexually evocative language, such as: peeps, ransacks, seizes, sister, strips, blossoms, etc. Here one sees, as it were, a Divine sexual predator. So this language dramatises the intense desire, and full-blooded passion that the Divine has for the soul.</p> <p><b>8. Characteristics of the Birth of the Son in the soul</b></p> <p>Time and time again as one reads for example, Eckhart's homilies, one finds them impregnated or saturated with the procreative or regenerative expression of: <i>The Birth of the Son in the Soul</i>. For instance, Predigt 101 commences: "Here in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth</p>	<p>remain long on the summit of the highest possible joy that is achievable in this world (stage 6), nevertheless, the peace, says Love which remains in the Soul is 'so delicious' that Truth calls it 'glorious food'.</p> <p><b>5. Nature of the soul</b> (three states)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Uplifted; stupefied in union of Divine Love</li> <li>2. Unencumbered from all things</li> <li>3. Without will and is above the intellect</li> </ol> <p><b>6. The soul's spiritual progress</b></p> <p>On the road towards annihilation (at Stage 5), the first 4 stages where 'the soul lives in some great servitude' are left behind.</p> <p>Now at stage 5, there is 'freeness of charity and the soul is unencumbered'.</p> <p><b>7. Erotica-spiritual desires of the soul</b></p> <p>Stage 6 is glorious because of the aperture opening, and because of the presence of 'Farness', presumably the transcendent – immanence of the Trinity in the Soul; and on the other hand, the Soul, although far from eternal joy, is however, near to it, when the Soul is occasionally transported to stage 7, and at that time, glimpses the glory of God – pure Divine Love - in her enraptured state.</p> <p><b>8. Characteristics of the Image of the Trinity in the soul</b></p> <p>In Porete's allegory, - 'mirror of simple souls' - the Image of the Trinity can only be superimposed in the Soul after the will has been annihilated. The interruption or eruption of the Trinity in the soul takes place at stage 5. The image of the Trinity occurs only in the Soul that is neither lost nor sad: that is, a Soul in which there is nothing lacking or Willing-Nothing</p>
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<sup>193</sup> DW111, Pr. 69, See also Walshe, vol.1, 298-299.

<p>which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human Nature”.<sup>194</sup></p> <p><b>To sum up:</b></p> <p>Eckhart uses robustly masculine language, e.g., peeps, ransacks, seizes, strips, to characterise the in-formation and re-formation of man, which is the Birth of the Son in the Soul.</p>	<p><b>To sum up :</b></p> <p>Porete’s language is genteelly feminine, for the soul after annihilation ‘is perfectly transformed ... into the love of the Bridegroom of her youth, who has transformed the bride completely into Himself’. Nonetheless, both Porete and Eckhart co-opts the language of courtly love for their metaphysical and theological purposes.</p>
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### 3.6 Meaning of soul for Porete and Eckhart

Besides sharing these fundamental ideas of *Birth of the Son in the Soul* and *The generation of the Trinity in the Soul*; *detachment* and *annihilation* between them, where essentially both thinkers are saying that the soul is where the Incarnation takes place; where God or the Son is born, or where the Trinity resides and does its work; there are also other commonalties between Porete and Eckhart. One of these commonalties we might term, *Union of Identity*.

That is to say that the soul and God are one. Eckhart says in *Predigt 6*: ‘So He makes me His only-begotten Son with no distinction’.<sup>195</sup> Or ‘God and I are one’ (*Got und ich wir sint ein*).<sup>196</sup> Similarly, Porete believes that fire transforms iron into itself, and to paraphrase her, she says, ‘iron invested with fire has lost its own semblance because the fire is stronger and thus transforms the iron into itself’. So also, is the Soul, which when, ‘completely invested with this greater part [the Trinity, and] because of the

<sup>194</sup> DW4.1, *Pr.* 101[QT.57] *Dum Medium Silentium* .... George Steer, Kohlhammer (2003), 335. See also Walshe vol.1,1.

<sup>195</sup> DW1, *Pr.* 6, 110/6-7. ‘Wan der vater ein werk wücket, dar umbe wücket er mich sinen eingebornen sun ane allen underscheit enist’. See transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 135-36.

<sup>196</sup> DW1, *Pr.* 6, 113/7.

love of the greater part, [takes] no account of the lesser'.<sup>197</sup>

Likewise, according to Porete, 'the soul dissolved, melted and drawn and united in the Trinity cannot accept the divine will through the divine work of the whole Trinity'.<sup>198</sup> However, despite this identification of union, there is still the notion of *union of distinction*. This is not necessary a contradiction of the first proposition that says that the soul and God/Trinity are the same, but this distinction avoids the charge, if nothing else of pantheism. So, although the soul and God are one, there is still an element of distinction between them. For instance Sermon 64 says: 'The soul is one with God and not united' (*Die Seele wird mit Gott eins und nicht vereint*).<sup>199</sup>

Eckhart uses the analogy of water in a tub to show this distinction. He says in effect, that whereas the water is in the tub, the tub is not the water. So, the water is not the wood, nor is the wood the water. Likewise, 'God is in the soul with His nature, with His being and with His Godhead, and yet He is not the soul' (*Got ist in der sele mit siner nature und mit sinem wesene und mit siner gotheit. Und er enist doch niht diu sele*).<sup>200</sup>

However, Porete's distinction is not as clear-cut as Eckhart's, for she seems more adamant to maintain that there is no distinction between the soul and God. For although she says: 'It is fitting ... that this Soul be similar to the God-head, for she is transformed into God ... which is why she has retained her true form, which is granted and given to her without beginning from One alone who has always loved her by His goodness'.<sup>201</sup> So she is suggesting that the soul has two natures here, by the term, 'her true form'.

However, her imageries of fire and iron, and river and sea appear to make no distinction between the soul and the divine. She says: 'Now such a Soul is without a name, and because of this she has the name of the transformed by which Love has transformed her. So it is with the waters of which we have spoken, which have the name of sea because they are wholly sea as soon as they have entered into the sea'. Likewise,

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<sup>197</sup> Babinsky, Cap. 52, 130.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. Cap. 68, 143.

<sup>199</sup> DW111, Pr. 64 [para. 86], 519.

<sup>200</sup> DW4,2 Pr. 109, Georg Steer, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 2003), 771.53/54. See also M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 81.

<sup>201</sup> Babinsky, Caps. 51, 128-29.

says Porete, ‘... no nature of fire adds any matter into itself, but instead it makes of itself and the matter one thing, no longer two but one...’.<sup>202</sup>

For Porete then, if there is to be a distinction between the Soul and the Divine, it is only because the Soul, although transformed into The Trinity at Stage 5, still possesses her intellect. For as Babinsky notes: ‘The soul in union with the divine retains her created faculties but abandons her human use of them ... That the faculties remain human even though they are filled with the divine, [this fact] maintains the distinction of natures in Marguerite’s notion of union’.<sup>203</sup> But this distinction is only apparent rather than real, for Porete is still wedded to the notion that the annihilated Soul has no existence, has non-existence, is ‘nothingness’ and *no-thing-less* (I have italicised and syllabised nothingless to connote variety and ambiguity) apart from God, and that the Soul only exists because it subsists in God.

We have seen in the foregoing discussion some of the areas of convergence between Porete and Eckhart; the question now is, how do those specific theological teachings, e.g., *The Birth of the Son in the Soul* and *The Generation of the Trinity in the Soul* affect the language of love, or more precisely, how does their language of love affect their theology and metaphysics?

### 3.7 Eckhart and Porete’s language of love

The language of love for Porete and Eckhart seems to have been not only shaped by the immediate chivalrous courtly space, or discourse of their times – about romantic love, or *fine amor* of knights for ladies – but their language of love predates the period in which they lived. Their language of love has emotional, psychic, cultural, religious, and philosophical strains that date back to Classical – early and later antiquity – periods, and such language of Porete and Eckhart is therefore infused with Platonic, Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic ideas and ethics. Likewise, their language of love is endowed with some Augustinian Trinitarian theology; thus, the teachings on love of Porete and Eckhart are bathed in the ethos of eros, *philia*, and *agape*.

The discussion, or rather the discourse regarding love for Porete and Eckhart,

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid. Caps. 83,158.

<sup>203</sup> Op. cit.

might appear at face value not to be about romantic or erotic love; and might appear to be more, or all about *caritas*, (*fine amour*; agape or divine love) and other such elevated affective concepts. However, their conceptions of divine love are formed by reference to the psychological, ethical, and sexual thoughts and actions of humans. Spiritualised, sanctified, and mysticised though the love-talk of Porete and Eckhart is, these concepts and contents have to be set within the context of human love relations.

However, Porete and Eckhart's theological *love-talk* is infused with the spirit of eros, *philia*, and ultimately agape, and such other Greco-Roman, and Ovidian love allusions. The basic building block of love, if one may call it that, for the Greeks was eros. The language of Porete and Eckhart is decorated with Platonic imageries, and seems to be undergirded by the *Forms* and *Ideas* of this *pagan* philosopher. For instance, both Porete and Eckhart lay great stress on the soul, and also on the role of body and soul – that ultimately the dualisms between them are resolved in annihilation and detachment.

These images of love and the soul for Porete and Eckhart are strongly reflected, for example, in Plato's *Phaedrus*.<sup>204</sup> Plato *via* Socrates gives a highly lyrical and poetic account of the soul. He tells of the soul's immortality; its unbegotten state; its efficient, and even final cause. In contrast, the body is without a soul because it is moved from the outside whereas the soul is self-moved and generates its own activity or life. From this standpoint, the soul is akin to divinity which is also self-moved, and it also moves all things.

Although Eckhart's language is not as *mystical* as Porete's – his is not only more populist, sometimes prosaic (cf. his German homilies), but more rigorous (cf. his Latin sermons); he nevertheless, in his homilies manages to portray the great joy, delight, and satisfaction that the soul finds in union with the divine. So for example, in re-visiting once again (see Cap. 1.2 above) Eckhart's Sermon 20(b)<sup>205</sup> about a Feast in Luke 14:16 (which is a parallel to the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper); this feast at evening time symbolises a period when the soul at rest, comprehends the divine light. At this time, and at this feast, the soul gets the best meal that is possible to be got, because the meal

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<sup>204</sup> *Essential Plato, Phaedrus*, transl. Benjamin Jowett, Alain de Botton, (1999), 804-813.

<sup>205</sup> DW1, Pr. 20b, *Homo quidam fecit cenam magnam*, (Luk 14.16) Josef Quint, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 1958) 342/1. See M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 241ff.

is consumed at a more leisurely time, and consumed in a more relaxed manner, and eaten in the presence of God – the divine light. Eckhart tells, that at that time, God gives Himself, all that He is in the supper as food to His dear friends.

Eckhart informs us that we eat this food and become one with Him; and just as the natural food that we eat becomes one with us, the divine food also becomes a part of the Soul. It is to be noted that in the parable of the *Feast*, the host or the man who makes the feast has no name. This nameless man is a metaphor for the ‘nameless’ God, who makes the divine feast, but who also has no name. So here in the *Eucharist* is this apophatic vision, which also signifies the mystery of the Incarnation, or the Birth of the Son in the Soul; Love is signified. In Eckhart, we have another glimpse of the Platonic divine essence that is ‘colourless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul’.

Throughout the Platonic dialogue for example between Phaedrus and Socrates, we see ideas of the nature of God, truth, wisdom, the soul’ essence; emanation from God and return to God; the ascent of the purified soul to the divine; and these same scenes are mirrored or played out in the human drama of life. However, there are souls though, that do not attain to the mysteries of true being, but who instead are ‘fed on opinion’, which in the theological schema of Porete and Eckhart, are the souls that depend on sense impressions, and the souls that are not annihilated or detached.

However ‘the soul which attains any vision of the truth’ experiences the *visio beatifica*, and that soul ‘being in the company of the gods is free from harm’. But the soul that is unable to follow and behold the truth will fall and degenerate, and will have to pass through several stages of diminishing statuses before it can regain its highest power. Recovery and restoration of the soul to its pristine condition can be accomplished through a regime of purgation and probation over many millennia.

Now, Eckhart and Porete take a different direction here from Plato, for whereas, Plato enunciates nine stages or cycles<sup>206</sup> encompassing, or consisting of thousands of

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<sup>206</sup> Plato’s 9 stages in diminishing status of importance consist of:

1. Philosopher/ artist/musically inclined
2. Righteous king/warrior chief
3. Politician/economist/trader
4. Gymnast/physician
5. Prophet/hierophant



years which are required for the less than wholesome soul to be rehabilitated; Porete and Eckhart do not give the soul any chronological periods; no numerical values; no occupational statuses, and no re-incarnational life spans in which to gain perfection; but instead, souls for Porete and Eckhart progress incrementally, spiritually, ascetically, and mystically from sin to grace; from time to eternity, from humanity to divinity; away from earthy encumbrances and attachments to detachment and annihilation; from self-will to divine will; from the outerman to the innerman; from the sensual to inward purity; melding spiritual contemplation with divine union.

Furthermore, whereas Plato's philosopher is at the highest pecking order on the ascent to the 'vault of the heavens'; who is the person or soul that has attained the highest level of *enlightenment* or perfection; which is the soul that shares most intimately in communion with God: Porete and Eckhart's detached or annihilated *souls* do not have this *elitist* or aristocratic stamp that Plato's soul has at its highest stage. Plato's purified soul accomplishes its *sumum bonum* by its own efforts, for its 'wings allow him according to his abilities, reason, intellect, to cling to the recollections of those things in which God abides'. The wings, akin to his own efforts then allow the philosopher to 'be initiated into the perfect mysteries and he becomes truly perfect'.

Likewise, for Porete and Eckhart, reason, abilities, intellect all play a part in the soul's conception or recollection of God; but, whereas with Porete and Eckhart, these human traits are suspended; they become *nothing* and are used by God for the soul's advancement; but, for Plato these human attributes play a significant role in advancing man towards divine likeness. However, the end results are the same for Porete and Eckhart as it is for Plato; that is, the ascent to the divine, whether humanly instigated or divinely assisted; that, in that climb, the soul 'forgets earthly interest and it becomes rapt in the divine'.

Other aspects of the Platonic spirit specifically imbue Porete's theology. For instance, Porete mentions the movement or opening of the 'aperture'. She says: 'And the sixth stage is glorious, for the aperture of the sweet movement of glory, which the

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6. Poet; imitative artist  
7. Artisan/ husbandman  
8. Sophist/demagogue  
9. Tyrant

gentle Farnearness gives, is nothing other than a glimpse which God wills the Soul to have of her glory itself, which will be hers forever'.<sup>207</sup> The same term *aperture* is used by Plato in regards to beauty. He says, 'She shines in the company with other celestial forms but she comes to earth shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense'. For Porete the Holy Spirit is this aperture. For Plato it is Beauty.

Plato believes that Beauty can be seen, but that there is no visible image of her, for if there were, it could be transported about – presumably, that would tarnish its loveliness – but in contrast to all other images, she is 'the most palpable to sight'. But the uninitiated and the corrupted cannot 'easily rise out of this world to the sight of true beauty...'. Such a person looks at mere earthly representation of beauty, and is given over to pleasures. But those who are initiated, upon seeing beauty are transported into an ecstatic state or a state of divine organism. During that state, 'the image of a god' appears, 'then while he gazes on him there is a sort of reaction, and the shudder passes into an unusual heat and perspiration; for, as he receives the effluence of beauty through the eyes, the wing [soul] moistens and he warms... During this process the whole soul is all in a state of ebullition and effervescence'. This language conveys a great degree of sensuality and sexuality.

Now, such amorous Platonic language is echoed by Porete and Eckhart in their own works; so, Porete for instance, through the words of *The Spouse of the Soul* says, 'I have sent you betrothal gifts by my Farnearness, but no one asks me who this Farnearness is, neither the works He does nor the work when He showed the glory of the soul, for one cannot say anything about it save this: the Farnearness is the Trinity Himself, and manifests His showing to her, which we name "movement", not because the soul moves herself in the Trinity, but because the Trinity works the showing of her glory in this soul'.<sup>208</sup>

Similarly, Eckhart shows the dynamic relationship between God and the soul, and how the birth of the Son in the soul, or union with the divine takes place by saying: 'For you to know God in God's way, your knowing must become pure unknowing, and

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<sup>207</sup> Babinsky, *Mirror*, Caps. 61, 138.

<sup>208</sup> Op. cit.

a forgetting of yourself and all creatures'.<sup>209</sup> When rhetorically he asks: 'Am I supposed to be in total darkness?' 'Certainly!' he exclaims. 'You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and in unknowing.... But what is this darkness? ...What is its name? 'The only name it has is 'potential receptivity', which certainly does not lack being nor is it deficient, but it is the potential of receptivity in which you will be perfected'.<sup>210</sup> 'And now once this 'Absolute stillness' occurs in the soul, without absolutely any effort on one's part – just be empty – be ready. And when this happens then 'God must pour Himself into you the moment He finds you ready'.<sup>211</sup> When the birth occurs, 'Your face is so fully turned towards this birth that no matter what you see or hear, you can get nothing but this birth from all things. All things become simply God to you, for in all things you notice only God, just as man who stares at the sun sees the sun in whatever he afterwards looks at'.<sup>212</sup>

So *Beauty* for Plato, or *Farnearness* (Holy Spirit) for Porete, or *potential receptivity* for Eckhart transports the soul to rapturous bliss, the feeling of which is captured in the dialogue<sup>213</sup> between Phaedrus and Socrates, before the soul became 'imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell'.<sup>214</sup> In Plato, his vision of bliss and beauty has been lost and is yet to be regained, but this bliss and beauty can be expressed by comparing them to how Porete and Eckhart's souls attain to the Divine. Thus: -

### Plato

Philosophers

### Porete and Eckhart

Divine souls

<sup>209</sup> DW4,1. Pr. 101, *Cum factus esset Iesus annorum duodecim*, Georg Steer, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 2003), 477-479/35-50 ff. Also see M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 40-41.

<sup>210</sup> DW4,1 Pr. 101. Also see M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 41.

<sup>211</sup> DW4, 1 Pr. 101. Ibid. 43.

<sup>212</sup> DW4, 1 Pr. 101. Ibid. 45.

<sup>213</sup> 'They [fallen souls trapped in human bodies] might have seen beauty shining in brightness, when, with the happy band following in the train of Zeus, as we philosophers did, or with other gods as others did, they saw a vision and were initiated into most blessed mysteries, which we celebrated in our state of innocence; and having no feeling of evils as yet to come ... shining in pure light, pure ourselves and not yet enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, as in an oyster-shell. Let me linger thus long over the memory of scenes which have passed away.' See *Essential Plato, Phaedrus*, transl. Jowlett (1999), 811.

<sup>214</sup> A pearl that is natural and of the finest structure is an object of great beauty and value. It is not only a metaphor for something precious; the pearl also symbolises souls that are lost in a world of matter and which have become forgetful of their true beginning. However, the recovery of the soul's true nature can only be attained according to Socrates by it being 'initiated into perfect mysteries'. These mysteries are 'colorless and formless ... intangible essence visible to the mind, the only lord of the soul'. In short, the souls if they are to return to their true origin must be partakers of 'the divine intelligence, mind and pure knowledge'. (Ibid. 807).

Zeus and other gods	The Trinity
Beatific vision/initiated into a mystery	Annihilation, Incarnation and Birth of the Son in the Soul
State of innocence	Pre-Adamic state
Experience of evils	Sin, estrangement and day of judgement
Admitted by virtuous accomplishments	Admitted by grace and love of God
Apparitions: innocent/simple/calm/happy	Angels/joy/contentment/detachment
Pure light	Wisdom, beauty, intellect, love
Pure selves	Oneness, unity, union
Enshrined in that living tomb Body and soul (dualism)	Now harmonised as God-man

Plato's soul rapt in Beauty is 'in a state of ebullition and effervescence' ... as 'she receives the sensible warm motion of particles which flow towards her, therefore called emotion or *imeros*, and is refreshed and warmed by them, and then she ceases from her pain with joy'. If she is separated from her beloved, '... in her madness can neither sleep by night nor abide in her place by day. And wherever she thinks that she will behold the beautiful one, thither in her desire she runs'.<sup>215</sup>

The soul is so passionate for her lover and the lover 'will never forsake his beautiful one, whom he esteems above all; [s]he<sup>216</sup> has forgotten mother and brethren and companions, and he thinks nothing of the neglect and loss of his property; the rules and proprieties of life, on which he formerly prided himself, he now despises, and is ready to sleep like a servant, wherever he is allowed, as near as he can to his desired one...'<sup>217</sup>

So the lover is prepared to abandon and despise all that was previously dear to her/him for the sake of her/his lover. So just as it is for Plato where the soul achieves union with its beloved, so it is for Porete and Eckhart; souls that have attained divine

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<sup>215</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>216</sup> I've bracketed the 's' to make the pronoun feminine. For the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus concerns pederastic love. That is an erotic relationship between an older man and a youth. During antiquity in Greece, pederasty was an educational institution for the inculcation of moral and cultural values by the older man to the younger, as well as a form of sexual gratification for the older male and teenage boys. Needless, to say that many societies now-a-days take a very dim view of this practice which when discovered is subject to the full force of the law.

<sup>217</sup> Op. cit.

love or union with the *One*, no longer are ‘enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about’, such souls are no longer ‘imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell’. Such souls, now even see the body as a plus that exists to administer to, or serve the inner man, and importantly, the inner man now moves or controls the body, so that it is kept within bounds of propriety and piety. For as Plato says:

... the villain [the unruly winged-horse; the will, or the outer man] has ceased from his wanton way, is tamed and humbled and follows the will of the charioteer [the divine will] and when he [outer man] sees the beautiful one [the lover, soul, Trinity, Son in the soul] he is ready to die for fear, and from that time forward, the soul of the lover follows the beloved in modesty and fear.<sup>218</sup>

This is Porete’s *annihilation* and Eckhart’s *detachment*.

Although, the outer man is now sufficiently chastened or mortified as the ascetics would wish it, the body for the non-ascetics is nevertheless needed as a partner with the soul; it is also needed as an instrument to serve the world, and to serve as a *Temple* for God; if not in the hereafter, then, certainly, in the here-and-now; and so it is both necessary and desirable for the body to be in good-working order in this natural world so as to engage the world in good deeds.

To conclude, although this final part of the discussion has been taken up with the Greco-Roman influences on Porete and Eckhart’s love-talk, the intention of the discussion was to show, that despite the tamping-down of overt public displays of sexual desires and pleasures that seemed to have been required, even demanded by some influential patristic and scholastics arbiters of sexual proprieties at the time; that, this talk of love, erotic or otherwise, although couched in mystical and metaphysical language, spoke of the latent sexual desires that medieval peoples, including Porete and Eckhart, felt.

That despite the valorisation of ascetic practices; that despite the ontologically rigorous conceptions about the real or imagined shortcomings of humanity owing to the pre-existential nature of original, individual, and corporate sins; Porete and Eckhart (despite these institutionalised and restricted sexual mores), attempted to bring out into the open; to divinise human love relationships (more cryptically in the case Porete, but more overtly with Eckhart), the natural, instinctive human sexual urges, desires and

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<sup>218</sup> Op. cit.

needs. Both these sexual religious metaphysicians spoke not only for society as a whole, but also more importantly for themselves about their own latent, if sublimated sexuality.

### 3.8 Song of Songs

Eckhart was deeply influenced by the language of the Bible where in some of the books of the Bible we find a most explicit sexual language with its various imageries. The best example, and highly influential of such a book, are *Canticles* or *Song of Songs*.<sup>219</sup>

The lyricist or poet of the *Song* (whether one or more poet) employs a wide range of imageries that incorporate the use of all the physical senses to demonstrate the intensity and the reality of the passion between the lovers. Some of these images are sensual, sensuous, and erotic, and these images employ the use of various aspects of the body including mouth, eyes, hair, breasts, cheeks, bowels, feet, tongue, the colour black, and so forth. For example,

The joints of thy thighs are like jewels.... (Chap. 7:2)

Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.... (Chap. 7:3)

Thy lips are as a scarlet lace.... (Chap. 4: 3)

The Song is redolent with other physical and non-physical imageries and objects taken from nature to depict the lovers. Such imageries include fruits, grapes, food, wine, animals (e.g. gazelles, lions, leopards), birds, perfumes, lotions, spices, cedar, clothes, cosmetics, and jewellery, plus other supporting props like military equipment (e.g., shield, armour, tower). The Song is an epithalamium as Origen calls it, or an ode that honours a bride or bridegroom.

Although the Song uses the word 'bride' from time to time, the term is however used alongside the word, 'sister' (e.g., Chap. 4:9,10,12). Likewise, the expression 'my bride' in some translations is used alongside 'my darling', 'my friend' and 'my sister-spouse' (Chap. 5:2). This term of endearment leads one to wonder, if indeed, the Song is really about an espousal; for the word 'bridegroom' is not used in the poem. So we have to conjecture that if there is a bride then there is a bridegroom. Such inferences like this one are what helps to make the poem intriguing as to what is its true intent. The

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<sup>219</sup> 'The Song of Songs, Palestine C. 315BC: A collection of love poems compiled anonymously from different sources. These profane poems are presented under the prestigious name of Solomon'. See Chronicle of the World, Longman Group, UK. (1989), 152.

poet uses other linguistic devices like metaphors, similes, symbols and analogies to embroider his love ballad, for clearly that is what the poem appears to be about: love of an amorous nature.

Another salient point about the poem is that it never once mentions God, and it contains very little, or no religious instructions as other parts of the Bible do. The question then is, why would it find its way into the Bible? Here is an explanation about its inclusion in the Hebrew Scriptures: The earliest rabbis ... are certain that it cannot possibly mean what it says literally. If it is among the sacred books, it must have a sacred meaning. Some rabbis even argued that as the most mysterious of books, it must have the most profoundly spiritual of meanings.

“The consensus of first-century Jewish scholars was that the poem was an allegory of God’s love for his people, Israel, hence its inclusion in the Ketuvim (The Writings) of the Tanakh (Jewish ‘Bible’). In the same manner, Christians also interpret the Song of Songs as an image or reflection of Christ’s love for the Church. However, modern literary scholars generally agree that the brief references to Solomon were added after the fact to rationalize its place in the scriptural canon”.<sup>220</sup>

We may reasonably conjecture then, that the *Song* found its way into the Holy Scriptures for the following reasons: (a) If its message go beyond the literal; then it must be spiritual; and being spiritual, it must contain divine truths. These truths are: God’s dealing with his people and his love for Israel. Hence, it should be included in the Bible (b) Because it bears the name of Solomon, and because he ‘spoke three thousand parables: and his poems were a thousand and five’ (1 Kings 4:32); and, because Solomon wrote other books, including, according to tradition, a book on Wisdom (although the Book of Wisdom is not included in the Jewish Scriptures, but in the Apocrypha); and because Wisdom and Love are personified, and therefore possess divine attributes; Song which is about love should be included in the Sacred Scriptures. Furthermore, because the book on Wisdom has very similar characteristics to Ecclesiastes which is included in the Sacred Canon, there is every good reason then to include *Song* in the Holy Canon.

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<sup>220</sup>Transl. Michael Fox *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, University of Wisconsin Press (1985), 82-94.

This conjecture, or parts of it, or none of it, may or may not be true. What might be plausible however, is that the *Song*, a splendidly erotic poem, might be a frame story in the genre of Middle or Near Eastern love poems similar to the *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*) stories of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. The main frame story of one of the *Arabian Nights* tales concerns a Persian king, Shahryar and his bride Scheherazade. She in an attempt to save herself from execution at the hands of the king regaled him with an endless supply of tales. Such stories so popular and common amongst peoples of that period, no doubt inspired the poet(s) of the *Song*. Therefore, following in such a distinguished pedigree of love poems, the poet(s) of the *Song* wrote about the Shulamite woman, and presumably King Solomon and this roller-coaster love-affair which involved, love in all its spontaneity, beauty, power and exclusiveness; love in its varied moments of separation and intimacy; love in anguish and ecstasy, tension and contentment.

Because of the *Song*'s resemblance to the love poetry of many contemporaneous societies at the time, it seems not unreasonable to theorise that Hebrew or Jewish scholars would want to include such anthologies that comprise *Song* in the Jewish Scriptures.

'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine'  
(*osculetur me osculo oris sui quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino*). Cf. *Douay-Rheims Version* based on the Vulgate Bible, or

'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine'.  
C.f. *King James Version*

At the outset of the poem, we observe that there are a couple of differences in the syntax of the verses between the Vulgate, and King James Version of the Bible. Whereas the Vulgate uses 'kiss' (singular), King James and other translations use 'kisses' (plural). Likewise, whereas the Vulgate uses 'breasts'; the KJV uses 'love'. The difference between kiss and kisses might be only a syntactic, semantic, stylistic or translational preference on the part of the translators; likewise, 'kiss or kisses of his mouth' may be a redundant phrase. For the question may well be asked: Why must there be a stipulation or qualification that 'kiss' or 'kisses' be directed to the mouth,



when it stands to reason that it is the mouth (or at least the lips) in a romantic encounter, that usually receives kisses.

The phrases seem just as redundant as if one were to say, 'speak to me *with your mouth*' or 'look at me *with your eyes*'. But such phrases may not be empty verbiage. They could signal emphasis, and such apparent redundancies are often used in poetry to stress, or to make vivid, a point. So we could reasonably say that the addition of the qualifying phrase 'kiss or kisses of his mouth' is meant to emphasise something about the 'kiss' or 'kisses'. That is, the lover does not want the kiss or kisses, say, to be on the cheeks or somewhere else, but wants contact with the mouth because the mouth is highly symbolic in many ways; and, one of the ways it is symbolic, is that the mouth is an area of erogeneity and sensitively, particularly if the tongue is employed in tasting, touching, and experiencing.

On the other hand, the eroticism of the poem may elude us, if we think that 'kisses to the mouth' literally means romantic actions or affections directed to that orifice from which speech comes. That 'mouth' where kisses are to be directed, may be some other erogenous zone of the body. Might this then be one of the reasons that many a religious commentator, or theologians have interpreted these apparent erotic verses as allegorical or figural in meaning? Is it why many Jewish rabbis say that the poem is meant to show the love of God for Israel? Is it why the male or 'bridegroom' in the poem is seen as Christ, and that the bride is viewed either as the Church or the soul of the believer by Christian commentators in order to avoid the charge of immodesty?<sup>221</sup>

Because kisses to the mouth may represent highly charged sexual language which is considered unchaste, is it one of the reasons then, that the *Song* has been allegorised in the belief that the Bible would not, and should not contain a book, just to describe mere human love, and sexual love at that? That if the language of the bride, is taken literally, then the behaviour that it promotes would be indecorous? Perhaps then, is it because of some imagined offence that people might take from interpreting the *Song* literally, that the poem has been sacralised, spiritualised and metaphorised? These are open and rhetorical questions. However, these questions are posed for the

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<sup>221</sup> See M. Fishbane, *The Kiss of God* (1994).

reason so as to draw our attention to the fact that, for similar reasons some of Meister Eckhart's language on sexuality has also been expurgated.

Let us take one example of this 'censoring', although deceit or deception is not intended to be suggested here by the use of the word censoring. What I mean, is that the sexual language is toned down so as not to cause offence to those with less robust sensitivities. One translation<sup>222</sup> of the statement about the *Father's fondness in begetting*, reads: 'There, the father gives birth to his son and has such joy in the Word, and he has such great love of it that he never ceases to speak the word all the time, that is, all the time.'<sup>223</sup> However, the word joy in the sentence should more accurately be rendered *lust*.<sup>224</sup> For *joy* in no way conveys the feeling of eroticism as does the word *lust*.

The word 'kisses' is used in the case of the KJV, but rendered 'kiss' in the Vulgate. Kisses seem to suggest that the lover is not content with just the singularity of kiss, but wants the plurality of kiss. This suggests something here very passionate, intense, and recurrent. Now, whereas the Vulgate uses 'breasts', the KJV uses 'love'. Presumably, 'love' in this context is not meant to be erotic or amorous, but *caritas* or *divine love*. In contrast however, the word *breasts* is a sexually-laden term; it is highly suggestive of sensuality, sexuality; nourishment, vivification, and comfort.

So the lover yearns for erotic lactation, or sexual arousal from suckling the breasts – that erogenous zone of the body. Now one might ask, why would the KJV substitute the word 'love' for 'breasts'? Is it to clean up the language; to make it less sensual? Less offending? Perhaps not, for as one reads the poem in the KJV, and in other versions of the Bible, the word breasts is used many times over in the poem. It is a theme that runs throughout the whole poem. It seems though that perhaps the Vulgate may have got the word wrong in the context of the verse. Here is the verse again: *Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine.*

Presumably, a female speaks, for the pronoun 'him' is being referred to. However, if it is a 'him', he would not necessarily have breasts. But a 'him' or 'he' can

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<sup>222</sup> See M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart, Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 259.

<sup>223</sup> DW I *Pr.19, Sta in porta* ... J. Quint (1958) [para. 2], 503.

<sup>224</sup> DW I 317,6-318,1. *Pr.19*, The MHG of Eckhart says: 'Dâ gebirt der vater sînen sun und hât sô grôzen lust in dem worte und im ist sô gar lieb dar zuo, daz er niemer ûfgehæret, er enspreche alle zît daz wort, daz ist über zît'.

have love. So perhaps KJV sees the anomaly here in the syntax, and uses love, recognising that the male to whom the female addresses her desires, does not have 'breasts'. But then again, the lovers, because we are here using poetry, could be interchanging roles with each other; they could be playing on words.

Because of these possibilities, these are some of the things that make the *Song* in many ways, ambiguous and beguiling. It is full of metaphors and symbols which keep us guessing at the true meaning of the words; looking for the meaning and identities of the characters, and guessing as to what the poem represents. Likewise, the words 'love' and 'breasts' are compared to wine.

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine; or thy breasts are better than wine. (Douay-Rheims Bible)*

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.*  
(KJV)

A couple interesting points may be raised here. Why is love, or breasts thought to be better than wine? Note the comparison 'better' and not 'sweeter'. What is the difference between these two words? First, let us look at 'better'. Better is a qualitative state of being that is observable. So when one says, for example, 'this is better than that', or 'X is better than Y' one compares two things by the visual senses. So 'better' seems more a concrete appraisal of things because it involves seeing. Our world is more negotiable, possible and real because we 'see' things. So love or breasts is better than wine, for the use of the word 'better' suggests a surer knowledge, because we can more readily prove, test, or apprehend knowledge because we see or feel some concrete object or event.

On the other hand, if 'sweeter' is used, this involves taste, and of course, taste is one of our primary ways of knowing the world. But 'sweeter' is not as immediate and compelling a state of being as seeing. Tasting is perhaps more subjective than seeing. For a person's taste is usually acquired, and so taste may be conditioned by a whole set of variables like experience, culture, tradition, health, sickness and other intervening, interacting, and countervailing stimuli.

So although taste is extremely important, it is qualitatively and objectively different from seeing, and thus taste defines the world and our experiences less precisely than seeing. We may for example, say to someone 'see this'; and, that person

can see that objective thing and report what he or she sees which can match-up with what we see. But if you say to someone, ‘taste this’, he or she, may say, ‘what am I supposed to taste? For a whole lot of sensations are involved in taste.

So when the lover of the *Song* says ‘love’ or ‘breasts’ is better than wine, she wants to evoke the imagery of sight which is usually more powerful an imagery than say the world of ‘taste’. We firstly seem to organise our world by sight, and maybe later, by taste. Moreover ‘better’ is more readily understandable, for not everyone drinks or tastes wine, but everyone who is not visually impaired, ‘sees’. In addition, love or breasts are compared to wine.

Now, wine is intoxicating; it can promote health; it incites the passions, and so forth. But love does all these things and more. Wine, however is limiting in its reach and effect; wine is finite; wine can be bad; wine can go off. But love is universal and eternal. In poetry, theology, and philosophy for instance, love is likened to God. In fact, love is God, says Christian theology. Love is better than wine not only in promoting greater passions and pleasures, but also, love is more powerful than wine; for, the poem towards the end of its rhymes, warns that, ‘... love is strong as death ...’. *Song* 8:6

This is an interesting comparison: *Love is strong as death*. Here is a simile where two unlike things are being compared with each other. It does not say love is death, nor does it say, death is love. Now, one may die for love, or love to die; and, although these things may be true, the poem does not say these things, nor does it say, love is death. It says, love is as strong as death. It is talking about ‘strength’. It is also interesting that the poem does not say, that love is stronger than death.

The poem juxtaposes love alongside death using the positive degree of the adjective, not the comparative or superlative states of the adjective to compare death. So love, i.e., the ‘strength’ of love and death are the same. This means that just as death is absolute, so is love. Death’s force is emotionally, emotively, and transformatively the most powerful, and most irresistible force there is: so is the force, or strength of love.

So love, just as death in its strength, cannot be impeded, cannot be denied, cannot be cheated, cannot be forestalled, and cannot be bribed. This then is the strength of love between the bride and the bridegroom in the *Song*.

Love is strong as death; but, the corollary of love and death is jealousy and hell, fire and flames. *Put me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy as hard as hell, the lamps thereof are fire and flames.* (Song 8:6). Such then are the immense forces that are at work, some erotic, some sexual, and some spiritual, and these forces are transcendental, existential, and ontological. These forces are rational and irrational; natural and supernatural; human and divine, and they all unite to express love at its profoundest depth, and at its highest height. Later we shall see how the profundity of love drives Eckhart's teachings on love and union with the Divine.

### 3.9 Eckhart's little bed

Under Eckhart the sexual imageries of the *Song* are transformed, transposed, and transferred into the pneumatic and psychic realms of the mind or intellect. What was therefore a mere erotic love ballad for many precious commentators, now, for Eckhart, becomes a divine hymn of praise and adoration of the *One*. So Eros, the Greek God of love, now unites with *Psyche* (the goddess of the soul), but they are not anymore joined paganistically, but joined Christologically.

When Eckhart takes up this melding of the soul (the bride) with the Logos (the Bridegroom), he does so in *Predigt 71*<sup>225</sup> by musing on the following verse of *Song 3:1*: 'In my little bed I've been looking all night, for the one whom my soul loves, and I found him not'.<sup>226</sup>

Eckhart draws attention to the first verse of this text thus: 'Now note a word spoken by the soul in the Book of Love: "In my bed by night I have sought him whom my soul loves and not found him"'. Eckhart proceeds to tell why the soul could not find God, and these are some of the reasons, I believe, why this soul could not find her lover: The soul is the *bed* and is in *bed*. This means, that the soul is confined, for like the bed (*Bettlein*) it is restricting. The bed gets in the way of one's search for God. Bed

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<sup>225</sup> DW III [3] *Pr. 71 Surrexit autem Saulus de terra apertisque* (Acts : 9-8) Josef Quint, 544.22/23.

"In meinem Bettlein habe ich die ganze Nacht hindurch gesucht, den meine Seele liebt, und ich fand ihn nicht". <Hohel. 3,1>.

<sup>226</sup> Latin Vulgate Bible.

represents comfort, rest, sleep, and states of ease or *dis-ease* (uneasiness, sickness or even laziness) or attachments.

One also associates bed with night and darkness – with dreams, nightmares and fantasies. The darkness conceals the light – here however, the *light* represents knowledge – but, although the light is shrouded in darkness, it is paradoxically shining in this darkness. But according to Eckhart, we cannot see this light for we are blind – blinded by our search. The soul in bed being unable to find her lover, gets up and runs about the streets to find Him. But she has no more success in finding her lover than before. So she asks the watchmen – *angels*, according to Eckhart – if they have seen her lover. But they are dumb. Eckhart says: ‘Perhaps they could not name him’ (*und sie schwiegen; vielleicht konnten sie ihn nicht nennen*)<sup>227</sup>, and for obvious reasons too: for the soul’s lover is ‘Nameless’.

Eventually, the soul finds her lover by going on ‘a little further’. This means that the bride has to pass over the ‘little’ or the smallest particle of hindrance in order to find God. One of the fundamental problems with the soul not finding God was that she was looking for someone whose name she thought she knew familiarly, and well. In fact, she had many names or descriptions for the One whom she thought she knew and loved. But He could not be found, for these names or descriptions by which she had heard her lover being called, and by whom she had called her lover, were mere aliases, cognominals, or *nom-de-plumes* as it were. These were not His real names. Those names were just nicknames that served as decoys intended to throw the soul (the Bride) off track in her search for her lover.

The soul at this point had no idea of what Eckhart and some mystics came to know as the ‘Nameless Name’, a notion encapsulated in the form of apophaticism. This apophatic approach describes God by negation, and addresses God only in terms of what He is not (apophasis), rather than presuming to describe what God is. This is negative theology – ‘God is not, *not*; therefore God Is’ – and is based on the assumption that God’s essence is unknowable or ineffable, and, that human grammar and speech are inadequate to describe God.

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<sup>227</sup> DWIII *Pr.*71, 545/226.

So the soul in seeking God by those names to which she was accustomed to call Him, was getting further away from God: and it was only after she abandoned those aliases, and experienced Him as the One – as her very heartbeat – that she was finally able to sense the presence of her lover.

The non-dualistic eroticism of Eckhart's God-talk, is laced with evocative sexual imageries in the vernacular style of chivalrous courtly love-talk, and embellished with highly sensuous expressions, but delivered in a masterfully sublime language, fused secular and profane love with spiritual and divine love; and, as we continue to explore Eckhart's sexual imageries, we will see time and time again, the blending of amor with caritas; the fusing of the erotic with the sacred – not a replacement or substitution of terms – in such a way that demonstrates the sexuality of divinity, and the divinity of sexuality; the affinity of divinity with sexuality and *vice versa*, and the affinity of divinity with humanity.

### **3.10 Eckhart's Son**

One of the foci where sexuality and divinity are closely associated is in Eckhart's notion of the 'birth of the son in the soul'. It would be no exaggeration to say that most of his entire theological corpus can be summed up by this metaphysical theme: birth of the son in the soul. This theme is composed of three foundational words: Birth, Son, Soul. Why is he mesmerised and possessed with these words? What do they mean? The entire essence of the spiritual life; the *raison d'être* of being for him hangs on these words. That is, nothing that exists, exists without birth, son, and soul.

The Birth of Son analogy is highly symbolic. The iconic image of mother and child is universal. This birth-imagery signals love, life, joy and renewal. So it is the same thing here with the Birth of the Son in the Soul. God's image, His creation, His essence or substance – His eternal Being, so as not to become stale, or redundant – is being constantly and continuously regenerated.

Eckhart employs such seemingly explicit, graphic, and even provocative sexual language that immediately attracts our attention, and such erotic imageries show the inescapable nexus between God and the soul. But his use of such dramatic sexual imageries is not intended to be either voyeuristic or vulgar; and his language is not

intended to exploit sexual imageries, or fantasies for gratuitous purposes. Rather his use of such sexually explicit, yet expressive and artistic vocabulary is intended to elevate, to transcend those inescapable facts of human existence, and to show the theo-mystical nature of sexual relations for the purpose of illuminating and elucidating the Christian mysteries of the Trinity, of the Incarnation, and the salvific work of God in humanity.

To further adumbrate the sexual imageries in Eckhart's Birth of the Son analogy we refer to this statement of Eckhart's. 'Here in time' he announces, 'we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature'. After quoting St. Augustine's declaration: 'What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters'. Eckhart continues:

We shall therefore speak of this birth, of how it may take place in us and be consummated in the virtuous soul, whenever God the father speaks His eternal Word in the perfect soul.<sup>228</sup>

Eckhart further adds that this sermon is about that Word. This is the Logos, and it is this Word that is to be born in the soul. He now proceeds to enumerate and systematically develop three motifs about the Birth of the Son in the Soul. These are:

Motif 1: *Where?* He poses a statement which functions as a question and as an answer by telling, '*where* in the soul God the Father speaks His Word; *where* His birth takes place, and *where* she (the soul) is receptive of this act'. He immediately informs us that the *where* can take place only 'in the very purest, loftiest, subtlest part that the soul is capable of'.

Motif 2: *Detachment*. That is 'maintaining a wholly God-receptive attitude, such that one's own self is idle, letting God work within one'. Detachment then allows for the Birth of the Son in the Soul.

Motif 3: The *profit* that accrues from the birth of the son in the soul. Now, the crux of this sermon is the Birth of the Son or Word in the Soul, but the birth takes place in a uniquely particular place, and it is this place that we seek to discover and in doing so, to elicit from it, the rich cornucopia of sexual imageries. The *Where*

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<sup>228</sup> DWIV/1 Pr. 101, *Dum medium silentium tenerent omnia*, Georg Steer, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 2003), 335-338, transl. M.O.C.Walsh, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 1.



part? ‘It is in the midst of silence<sup>229</sup> that the secret word was spoken within me’ says the Meister who takes his cue from *Wisdom* 18:14, 15: ‘For while all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, Thy Almighty word leaped down from heaven from thy royal throne ...’.

It is significant that Eckhart omits the last phrase of verse 15 which says, ‘as a fierce conqueror into the midst of the land of destruction’. Perhaps he did not possess a *psychology* of retribution or vengeance, but he was rather a gentle<sup>230</sup> man; so, he did not have to use the fierce language of *conquer* and *destruction*. Notwithstanding this omission, it does not detract from the secretive and dramatic nature of the occasion.

The combined mood of the verses set against a serene backdrop of silence and darkness on one hand is re-assuring, yet on the other hand, in contrast to this calm and serene scene, the language is dramatic and dynamic; and, it is precisely under these conditions of darkness, secrecy and great suddenness, liken to destruction, and akin to Eckhart’s *abegescheidenis* or detachment, or even akin to Porete’s *annihilation*; that the majestic act of Birth of the Son – conception – takes place in the soul. It is also under these dramatic settings and during secret rendezvous that love is sometimes played out, but more about this later.

The precise *where* or whereabouts – the nativity scene – or the place of birth of the son in the soul ‘is in the purest thing that the soul is capable of, in the noblest part, the ground – indeed, in the very essence of the soul which is the soul’s most secret part!’ This language is so sensuous that this part of ‘the soul’s most secret part’ – the *ground*, calls for a deeper analysis.

The Ground: In Eckhart’s vernacular sermons *grund* or *abgrund* is German for *reason* or *abyss* respectively. The ground or the *abyss* of the soul is *Der abgrund der seele*. In other words, the ground of the soul is the *reason*, the *why*, the *in principio*, the

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<sup>229</sup> DWIV/1 *Pr.* 101, 338/11-13. ‘... dô alliu dinc wâren enmitten in einem swîgenne, dô kam von oben her nider von dem küniclichen stuole in mich ein verborgen wort. Hie ûz sol disiu predige gân’. Georg Steer, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 2003). See also M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I,1.

<sup>230</sup> We get a hint of his gentleness here in this ‘bashful’ comment of his: ‘On the way when I had to come here, I was thinking that I did not want to come here because I would become wet with tears of love. If you have ever been all wet with tears of love, let us leave that aside for now’. (Unterwegs, als ich hierher gehen sollte, fiel mir ein, ich möchte <lieber> nimm hierher gehen, weil ich doch <wohl> tränenbenetzt werden würde aus Liebe. Wann ihr <je> euch <mit Tränen> benetzt habt aus Liebe, das wollen wir auf sich beruhen lassen). DW I *Pr.* 22, (Mod. Gr. transl.), Quint, [para.3], 519. Also see E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 195.

*source* – the *abyss* means, profundity or depth. The ground is the *essence*. It is *Being* itself. In theological terms, ground simultaneously is the union of God with the soul, and the interior divine life of the soul in God. Ground is both passive and active, both virginal and fertile; both sterile and fruitful.

It is here in this void, this blank, this darkness, this silence – in the abyss – that the Birth of the Son takes place. The ground is the region, not spatially, but transcendentally; it is the First Principle, for as the Meister says:

It is true that here below, in this life, that power by which we know and understand that we see is nobler and better than that power by which we see, since nature begins her work at the weakest point while God begins his at the point of perfection.<sup>231</sup>

Eckhart goes on to explain what he means: ‘Nature makes a man or woman from a child and a chicken from an egg, while God makes the man or woman before the child and a chicken before the egg’.<sup>232</sup> So Eckhart implies that the *cause* is greater than the *caused* or the caused is lesser than the cause. But also the conundrum of what came first, ‘the chick or the egg’ is resolved; for him, the chicken has to come first – it was primary – for the chicken was caused or created by God.<sup>233</sup> So these first principles represent the ground, but tellingly, expresses sexuality.

Now, in the ground of the soul, intense love, passions and *lust* are played out. Eckhart says: ‘Now know that God loves the soul to a miraculous degree. If God could be prevented from loving the soul, then he would lose his life and his being. It would kill him, if it is possible to say such a thing, for that same love with which God loves the soul is his life, and in that same love the Holy Spirit burgeons [in effect, pregnant] and this same love is the Holy Spirit.’<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> O. Davies, Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings, On the Nobleman*, 107.

<sup>232</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>233</sup> Eckhart’s view on the conundrum about which came first: ‘chicken or egg’ is very intuitive. For although it is reported that a team of British scientists from Sheffield and Warwick universities claimed that it was the chicken that came first, because they discovered that eggs only become possible because of a protein found in the chickens’ ovaries (<http://uk.news.yahoo.com/>) [accessed 14 July 2010], it still begs the question: But what in the first place gave rise to the chicken? Eckhart provides the answer that ‘God makes ...the chicken before the egg’.

<sup>234</sup> DW Pr. 69 *Modicum et iam non videbitis me*, ‘Wisset nun, daß Gott die Seele so stark liebt, daß es ein Wunder ist. Wenn man es Gott nähme, die Seele zu lieben, so nähme man ihm sein Leben und sein Sein, oder man tötete Gott, wofern man so etwas sagen dürfte; denn eben jene gleiche Liebe, mit der Gott die Seele liebt, die ist sein Leben, und in derselben Liebe blüht der Heilige Geist aus, und diese gleiche Liebe ist der Heilige Geist. Da nun Gott die Seele so stark liebt, so muß die Seele etwas entsprechend Großes

In this intense romance or courtship – even obsession – between the God and the soul, God tolerates no rivals; there can be no intermediaries between God and the soul, says Eckhart. God wants the soul to be denuded and stripped of all intermediaries. Where there are no competitors; and, when the soul is detached and wholly God's, then '...God too would be stripped bare for her and would give himself to her fully'.<sup>235</sup> God alone claims reproductive rights on the soul, for as Eckhart explains: 'God is fertile in the soul alone'.<sup>236</sup> The sexually loaded imageries of Eckhart are candidly expressed by the following statements:

God wants to have us only for himself and for nobody else. Hence, he dresses up and offers himself to the soul, and endeavours with his entire divinity, to snuggle-up with the soul, because he alone would like to thrill the soul and in this, he does not want to have a rival. God does not stand a crowd, nor does he want that something else is being looked out for nor longed for except himself.<sup>237</sup> In addition, Eckhart asks us to:

Strip away from God ... everything which clothes him and take him in his dressing room where he is naked and bare in himself. Thus you will remain in him.<sup>238</sup>

Paraphrasing Eckhart, he also informs us that: 'God takes pleasure (actually, this pleasure is *lust*) and satisfaction in pouring out his nature and being into things that have the same likeness like himself'.<sup>239</sup> This means God finds pleasure creating and being born in the soul. Eckhart also says:

'God finds it delightful to create, it gives him satisfaction and relaxes him... God has "lust" and satisfaction where he finds sameness, for he is this sameness himself. God, because he is lustful must let himself go without reservations or limits. Whereas a mother or a father cannot recreate [themselves] but at best creates a similar or even unsimilar daughter or son, God solely has full capacity

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sein'. Josef Quint, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 1976), 536.163/64. See also Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings* (1994), 210.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid. 211.

<sup>236</sup> DW IV/1 Pr. 102, *Ubi est, qui natus est rex Iudaeorum?* '... er [Got] ist alleine gewal gebernde in der selê'. Georg Steer, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 2003), 409.10/13. See Davies, *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings*, 215.

<sup>237</sup> DWII Pr. 41, 295,1-4. transl. M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 45.

<sup>238</sup> DWII Pr. 40, 687-274/5-7: 'Drum scheidet von Gott alles das ab, was ihn umkleidet, und nehmt ihn rein in der Kleiderkammer, wo er aufgedeckt und entblößt in sich selbst ist So bleibt ihr in ihm.' Josef Quint, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 1971). See transl. Davies, *Eckhart Selected Writings*, 149.

<sup>239</sup> DWI Pr. 12, *Qui audit me* <Eccli.24,30>: 'Ebenso ist es für Gott lustvoll und beglückend, wenn er Gleichheit findet. Es ist ihm eine Lust, daß er seine Natur und sein Sein da völlig ausgießt in die Gleichheit, weil er die Gleichheit selber ist'. Josef Quint (1958), para. 7. ll. 13-15, 478. See transl. Oliver Davies, *Eckhart Selected Writings*, 178.

to create them all, the whole kosmos, that is why he creates in his birth his self-image'.<sup>240</sup>

Eckhart's re-modelling of the neo-Platonic ontological constructs in the language of the Christian discourse, tell that the One's relationship with his cosmos is anthropologically dynamic; that the One, despite its inaccessibility to human understanding, nonetheless, the One by the means of Grace, now assumes humanity, and that humanity becomes divinity. All this is achievable by the Eckhartian iconic metaphor of the 'Birth of the Son in the Soul'. Such a symbol is a powerful and sexually evocative one.

In addition, anything or everything apart from the Soul is non-being – that is being without God. With the Soul then, there is a constant re-engagement of it with God, and God with the Soul. This is the *return*. This is the neo-Platonic dialectics, or the equivalence to a triadic system of discourse where the *thesis* – an intellectual proposition – e.g., nothing can be said of God, or at least nothing meaningful can be said of God; or that, if anything can be said of God, then it is meaningless; that is, it is not about God, but mere human babble.

The antithesis is simply the negation of the thesis, a reaction to the proposition. In this case: that which is meaningless about God is true and not true. That is, God is all those things said about Him, yet, He is none of those things said about Him. He is beyond all descriptions. This is the *negation of the negation*. That is: God is everything yet nothing; He is nothing yet everything.

The synthesis resolves the conflict between the thesis and antithesis by reconciling their common truths, and forming a new proposition. So in this case, all that can be said about God with any certainty is that God is *The One*. He/She/It – the correct figure of speech is not certain, except that in the apophatic tradition, it could be all of these pronouns, or none of these. But the *via negativa* doctrine ventures to describe a few of the properties of the One by saying the One is *Absolute*, *Ineffable* and *Indistinct*.

It seems then, that these technical statements about the One are a pragmatic decision, if we hope to have a basic conversation about *being qua being*. So, expressed

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<sup>240</sup> See DWII *Pr.* 39: 'In dem geberne sô nimet der vater sô grôze ruowe und lust, daz er alle sîne natûre dar inner verzert'.

another way, the negation of the negation is the positive. Thus *Deus est Unitas* and its obverse is also true.

The soul's return to or union with God requires total renunciation – that which Eckhart calls *detachment*. Here we see traces of neo-Platonism in this concept. But this is really an *ascent* to the One. And the path lies in an imageless or 'apophatic' type of meditation. One quiets oneself, getting rid of the 'lowest' and moving to the 'higher'. That is, one quiets first the body, then the images of the mind, then the words and thoughts of the mind, opening up the possibility of the unmediated encounter with the One, 'the flight from the alone to the alone', as Plotinus called it.

What is usually emphasized is that this experience is ineffable and indescribable, yet intensely real, the most real experience one can have. Such a mystical practice, whether rooted in the pervasive influence of the neo-Platonism of Plotinus or not, is widely represented in the medieval spirituality, tradition for example, in Meister Eckhart.

In all of the above discussions, the essential sexual imagery to come out of these discussions is that there is an eternal regeneration which functions like an organic or biological system; such that, energy is not destroyed, but is conserved, and channelled; and thus it becomes the new building blocks, or raw materials, or source of energy for new systems, both organic and inorganic. This emanation and return is as if the ocean were like a raindrop, and the raindrop were like an ocean. That is, from the ocean comes the rain by process of radiation, heat transference, and precipitation when the clouds become water vapours, and then rain.

This rain becomes streams and rivers which eventually returns to the ocean to be recycled yet once again. So it is with Soul's relation with the Infinite. It is a *love embrace*, and this love, like the flaming Sun diffuses its rays of light and energy, and penetrates, even inter-penetrating the *uncreated* part of the person – the Soul. The rays, energy, or spark of God reside in the Soul. The entry of the spark of God into the Soul is akin to the act of conception, and there the 'birth of the Son in the soul' – an *incarnation*, or an impregnation of the soul with the seed or Image of God according to Eckhart's theology - takes place. But this theology is deeply imbued with the practice and spirit of sexuality.

### 3.11 Eckhart's 'Quoniam ex ipso', etc.

Eckhart's *Latin Sermon IV/1* has this statement, 'Ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia ...'.<sup>241</sup> He commences this sermon by an explication of Paul's declaration found in Romans 11:36. Eckhart explains: 'Take note, that with the statement, "For of him, and by him, and in him, are all things", that its meaning lies in the fact, that He Himself is in all things and everything is in Him. Anything through which another things exists is in Him in a general way'.<sup>242</sup> I shall graphically represent Eckhart's 'Ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia' dictum below by three pictorials:

Diagram 1: **All things in God**

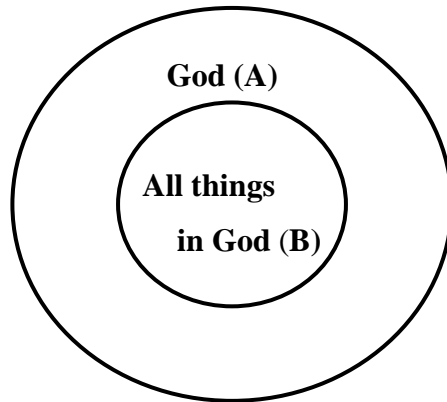
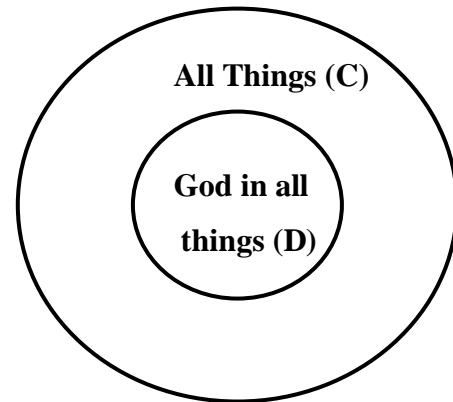


Diagram 2: **God in all things**



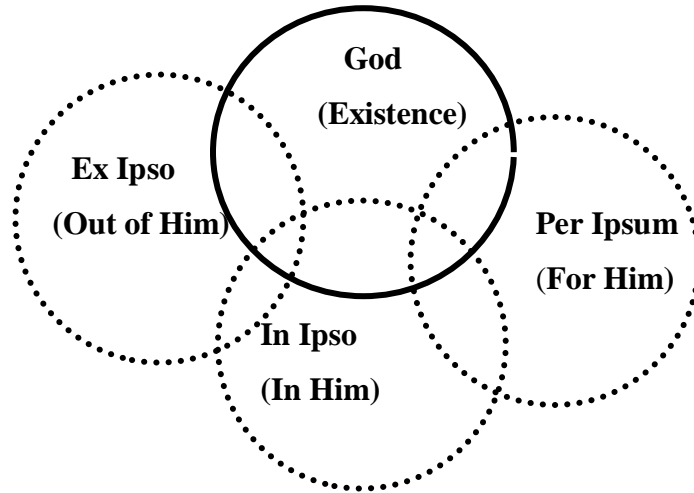
In Diagram 1, the inner circle (B) shows that 'All things are in God' (A). This statement about 'all things in God' means that nothing exists without God. Thus nothing, whether good or evil escapes the remit or purview of God. Likewise, in Diagram 2, 'God (D) is in all things' (C), this means that everything to some degree (*in a general way*) contains God or something of God although *all* things are not all *necessarily* God.

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<sup>241</sup> 'For of him, and by him, and in him, are all things', Op. cit.

<sup>242</sup> Op. cit.

Diagram 3: **Out of Him; for Him; in Him**



Likewise, Diagram 3, because the three outer dotted circles all have a part of their arch within the bold circle (God), it tells the same story about ‘all thingness of God’. This *Venn*-type picture tells that all things come from God (*ex ipso*); that all things function for God (*per ipsum*); and that all things remain in God (*in ipso*). Thus everything comes *out of*, *go through*, and *remain in* God. In sum, in Eckhart’s ontology no existence is possible without God, who Himself is pure Existence.

But although in diagram 2 it seems that things are identical with God and *vice versa* – which were they so, would be a form of pantheism or panentheism – this however is not strictly so for Eckhart; for although God is in all things and all things are in God, there is still yet a distinction between God and things. So it is with the soul; it is in God, is God’s, but she also has her own identity. But it is an identity or a relationship with God in much the same way as when the ocean creates the rain, which as water returns to the sea to be re-absorbed. So it is with the relationship between God and the soul – He creates it to be re-absorbed back into Him.

### 3.12 Sexual Significance of Eckhart’s ‘Quoniam ex ipso’, etc.

As already stated one of the Meister’s favourite mantras is: ‘Quoniam ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia’,<sup>243</sup> ‘Quoniam’ is: *because, for, out of, etc.* However,

<sup>243</sup> LWII 491ff: Quare deus et creatum quodlibet indistincta. Ad hoc est illud Rom. 11: ‘ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia’ (Why God created each and indistinct. To this is to Rom. 11: ‘of Him, by Him and in Him are all things’). LW III 202, 241ff: Tertio oportet relinquere omnia volentem sequi deum,

Eckhart does not start with *quoniam* because that word implies something that is a *given*. He begins: ‘Ex ipso’, again, confirming this *very fact* that *out of Himself*, or because of his *existence*, all things *are*. *Ipsa* is ablative and dative case; therefore, Himself is thus both the *beginning* and the *end*, or the *Alpha* and the *Omega*. All things are contained in *Himself*; all things flow from *Himself* and all things are returned to *Himself*.

Next, the expression, ‘et per ipsum’: ipsum means ‘itself’. It is the neuter form of *ipse*, which also means ‘himself’. Ipsum is a singular number in the accusative case. Thus, ipsum is that direct object which receives the *action* of the word *through*. *Through* implies movement or flow. So *itself* is therefore not only the subject or the nominative, but the object of the accusative and dative cases, and so it means that *itself* participates in, and partakes of the actions, and it is shaped by connections and prepositions that govern it – i.e. *itself*.

In the past, the significance of the term ‘ex ipso ...’ may have been lost on its readers, for the statement, a neat aphorism seems like a ‘catchy’ or ‘witty’ catch-phrase which shows by its simple use of prepositions, the workings of divinity. However, if that were the view held about *ex ipso*, etc., we will see after a closer inspection, that this was a very limited understanding, or even a mis-characterisation of the expression. For

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quia in ipso sunt omnia, Tob. 10: ‘omnia in te uno habentes’; et Rom. 11: ‘ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia’ (Thirdly, it is necessary to relinquish all willing to follow God, because in Him are all things, Tob. 10: ‘having all things in thee alone’, and Rom. 11: ‘of Him and through Him and in Him are all things’). LW IV 13ff: ‘ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia. Ipsi honor et gloria’. Videtur autem mihi quod in hoc verbo habetur personarum trinitas, ipsarum proprietates, earum aequalitas et ipsarum in esse identitas (However, it seems to me that in this word, is the trinity of persons, their property, their equality and their identity into being) ‘Ex ipso’, scilicet pater: ecce persona patris et eius proprietates. Nam ab ipso, scilicet patre, ‘omnis paternitas in caelo et in terra nominatur’, Eph. 3. ‘Per ipsum’, filium scilicet, Ioh. 1: ‘omnia per ipsum facta sunt’ (‘But of him’, namely, the father: behold, his property and person of the Father. For from him, namely, the Father, ‘the whole family in heaven and on earth is named’, Eph. 3. ‘Through him’, namely, a son, John. 1: ‘All things were made by Him’). LW IV 22 ff.: ‘Ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia’, Rom. 11.36. Nota: cum dicitur ‘per ipsum sunt omnia’, ‘per ipsum’ sensus est quod ipse est in omnibus (Note: when it is said ‘they are by Him all things’, ‘through him’ the sense is that he is in all things). Omne enim, per quod est aliquid, universaliter utique est in illo. (For every, through, which is something, of course, in that man is universally). Verbi gratia: albedo, per quam est albus aliquis, utique est in illo. (For example, whiteness, through which a man is white, of course, is in him.) Nihil enim album est albedine quae est in altero. (For nothing which is the white thing is whiteness in the other). Vult ergo dicere apostolus et docere (Therefore, the apostle means to say, and to teach) quod omnia sunt a deo, deus in omnibus et omnia in ipso (that all things are from God, God in all things and by him all things). Secundo nota quod non ait nec addit: ‘propter ipsum’ ‘sunt omnia’: primo, quia deus, et per consequens homo divinus, non agit propter cur aut quare. (Secondly, note that he does not say, nor add: ‘for the sake of’, ‘all things were’: First, because God, and, consequently, a divine man, why he does not act for or why).



on closer examination, it will be found that the term *ex ipso*, etc., goes far beyond mere detonative signification; that in fact, the term has prescriptive implications that serve as ontological and cosmological markers for the presence of Divinity in the cosmos.

*Ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso omnia ipsi* and the individual variables that make up the expression are metaphors for the active, creative and fertile involvement of God in the world. It also contains an abundance of sexual motifs which we will talk about later.

Ipsos, is in fact the Logos – *the Word made Flesh*. Ipsos is the mind of God put into motion. So the governing, qualifying and describing words such as: *for, of, through, in, because, from, out-of*; denote, but also connote that this lexicography mirrors the methodologies that guide God's *modus operandi*.

God uses *ex ipso* to do His work, but he Himself is *ex ipso* – i.e. out of, or from Himself; and this *ipso* (itself) is the same as *ratio*, or the *in principio*; and these *apriori* principles and *aposteriori* principles explain, give meaning and show the coherence behind the process of emanation. So armed with a deeper understanding of this term *ex ipso*, we now observe that the entire expression: *Ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia* carries great anthro-theological weight; which tells how the divine runs His cosmos.

Furthermore, it must also be noted that the next term *ipsum* (itself) which in English is the neuter, personal pronoun (the reflexive form of *it*, masculine himself, feminine herself, plural themselves), and it also has a creative power. Now, several interesting things flow from this observation about *ipsum* or itself:

(a) Firstly that *ipsum* (it-self) is reflexive. That is 'it' is just a part of self. The 'it' part of *self* assumes a life of its own and sometimes engages in its own actions and thoughts. *It* is something that becomes the object of a verb or preposition, and also at the same time becomes the subject. This object/subject relationship can be grasped by this statement. 'The window flew open by *itself*'.

So on one hand, there seems to be an independent action on the part of the window because the action (flew open) was done as if by an autonomous agent – *itself*; yet, on the other hand, the window could not have done this on its own volition – make itself open – for in reality, there is no division between the *itself* and the window,

because itself as the object is allied to the subject by the predicate. So the *itself* is in reality reflexive of the subject in as much as the subject is reflexive of the object.

Secondly (b) *itself* is also emphatic because it is used to give the subject more intensity; itself, therefore emphasises the fact that ‘it’ of itself is the only participant in the predicate, as shown by this example: ‘The window *itself* is very old’. So *itself* then assumes a prominence that is exclusively its own.

Now applying these semantic principles to Eckhartian ontology and theology, we will see that ‘*ipsum*’ (itself) seems to have a mind or *intellect* of its own, and it is this mind that is reflexive or intellective, and which brings things into existence. And just as it is in the field of human endeavours where the mind defines us – ‘*cogito ergo sum*’ – so it is even more so for the Divine, who as *Pure Mind*, in His reflexive processes of thinking, and recognising His thinking, creates His own existence and all other existences. It might be *apropos* to note here Eckhart’s phenomenological insight with the foregoing statement. So Eckhart ascribed Intellect, Wisdom, Logos or Mind to *Ipsum* – i.e. himself, herself and itself. It is this reflection that gives the Divine its being, and from this reflection there comes ‘all things’ – *sunt omnia*.

Of course, other theological, ontological and epistemological truths flow from the reflexivity of the One, for His reflection is mirrored in the Trinity, in the cosmos, and most importantly for Eckhart, *ipsum* is reflected in the Soul wherein the Divine Image shines.

Furthermore, *ipsum* is reflexive and emphatic because of the propositions that Deus est *Unus*, and ‘*ego sum qui sum*’ ‘I AM WHO I AM’ declaration to Moses (Ex. 3:14). Itself is reflexive also because it is the *third* person singular. This third person for Eckhart relates to the Holy Spirit, which is reflexive or reflective of the Trinity.

*Ipsum* is reflexive of the Holy Spirit, the latter, is a being which often takes the form of the neuter gender. So the third person (itself) is said to represent a *force*, *energeia*, a *spirit*, a *breath* and so forth. The third person also takes on the feminine gender. However, she is simultaneously itself, himself, and herself. She is the soul too,

but she also has both masculine and feminine characteristics. She is also the *love* between the Father and the Son.<sup>244</sup>

Note also the term *omnia*. It can be used as an adjective as well as a noun. So *all*, describing things, means, ‘all or every’ thing. As a noun *omnia* means ‘things’. But in our discussion, I will use *omnia* as an adjectival noun and to make it mean ‘all’ or ‘everything’. That is, all or everything is in the plural, for the grammar attests to this fact.<sup>245</sup> So here again, Eckhart wants us to know that God is in all things, and that the converse is also true – that all things are in God. In one of Eckhart’s statements of ‘ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia. Ipsi honor et gloria’,<sup>246</sup> we notice he uses the term *Ipsi*. What does this mean? *Ipsi* (himself) is:

1. nominative masculine plural of *ipse*
2. dative common singular of *ipse*

*Ipsi* is also

- (i) dative masculine singular of *ipse*
- (ii) dative feminine singular
- (iii) dative neuter singular and
- (iv) nominative plural of *ipse*

So the dative case, according to the rules of declensions and syntax is where the dative *expresses the indirect object after verbs of giving and saying*.<sup>247</sup> Thus, for example: A gave B to C. ‘C’ is the dative case for it is amenable to questions like ‘To whom’. Or another example is: ‘X gave Y what is for Z’. This latter statement responds to the question ‘Gave what?’ So such relationships are reflexive of the dative case; this is where a pronoun or noun is the indirect object of a verb.

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<sup>244</sup> For instance, Eckhart says: ‘The Father is a beginning of the divinity, for he understands himself in himself, and out of this the Eternal Word proceeds and yet remains within, and the Holy spirit flows from them both, remaining within and unbecoming, for insofar as he remains within he is an end of the divinity and all created things; he is pure repose and a resting of all that being ever acquired’. DWI, transl. E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 192.

<sup>245</sup> *Omnia* (adjective)

1. nominative neuter plural of *omnis*
2. accusative neuter plural of *omnis*
3. vocative neuter plural of *omnis*

*Omnia* (noun) (genitive *omnium*); n. plural

<sup>246</sup> LWIV 13.

<sup>247</sup> Gavin Betts, ‘Complete Latin’ (London, 2010), 3.

Now, what do all these language patterns tell us then about Eckhart's use of *ipsi*? It tells us that the end product of God's works – the *indirect* objects or the final causes – is, and here is the surprise, for *Himself*. So he creates things for Himself and he does so without a 'Why'.<sup>248</sup> But as God who is rich according to Eckhart<sup>249</sup> wishes to share his wealth with humanity, he does so by creating the soul; and so, because the soul is God's, it too partakes of the end product of God's creation.<sup>250</sup> Thus God created the world for the soul (dative case), but at the same time he created the soul for the world.

This second statement where the word order of the first statement is inverted now puts the soul in the accusative case thereby making it the direct recipient of the action. But all this is only a part of the picture, for there is another case which is worthy of note, and this is the *ablative* case. This case is preceded by the prepositions: 'by', 'with' 'from', and such a case describes the creative work of God. So the phrase 'For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things ...' actually can be restated to read, 'That *from* him, and *by* him, and *with* him ... all things are'.

Amazingly also *ipsi* is very flexible as we have already seen above. What *ipsi* signifies is that while things are one, they are plural; that while being masculine, they are also feminine (*ipsa*) and neuter (*ipsum*). *Ipsi* as we already stated is also very closely related to *ipse* (himself), and *ipsi* is in the dative case masculine singular; feminine singular and neuter singular; and nominative plural.

So *ipsi* speaks boldly about plurality, and at the same time, singularity; it speaks about the masculine, feminine and neuter characteristics of *himself/herself* and *itself*. So clearly, *ipsi* along with *ipso* and *ipsum* in the phrase, 'ex ipso, et per ipsum, et in ipso

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<sup>248</sup> LWIV 23ff. "Quod autem scriptum est: 'universa propter se ipsum operatus est dominus', Prov. 10, exponitur ex iam dictis; vel dicit 'propter semet ipsum', non propter aliud. (But Scriptures says: 'The Lord hath made all things for himself' (Prov. 10), explains the discussion above and says 'for himself' and not for anything else'".

<sup>249</sup> DWIII, transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 333: 'Thus God is rich in himself and in all things... God's wealth is based on five things. First, he is the first cause and hence constantly pours himself forth into all things. Second, he is simple in his being and hence in the inner most part of all things. Third, he is the source and hence spreads himself over all things, Fourth, he is unchangeable and hence is the most constant. Fifth, he is perfect and is hence the most desirable'.

<sup>250</sup> Eckhart says: 'Out of the purity he everlastingly bore me, his only-born Son into that same image of his eternal Fatherhood, that I may be Father and give birth to him of whom I am born ... He gives birth to his Only Begotten Son in the highest part of the soul, and as he gives birth to his Only-Begotten Son into me; so I give him birth again into the Father'. DWI, transl. College and McGinn, *Essential Sermons*, 194-195.

sunt omnia. *Ipsi honor et Gloria*’ reflect *omnium-ness*, the *all-thing-ness*, or the totality of divinity.

*Ipsi* says He is the subject, and object; that He is masculine and feminine and neuter. He is singular and plural. So himself, herself, itself encompass all things; yet still for all, that *in-all-ness* is in himself, herself and itself. He is the direct and indirect object. He is the *causes* – ‘out of’, the ‘by,’ the ‘to’, the ‘with’, the ‘through’, the ‘in’, the ‘and’; thus in the language of one ancient Philosopher, the *One* or *Himself* in his various pronominal representations is the:

*material* cause – the stuff from which things come, and of which things consist

*formal* cause – the form of a thing; the *eidōs*; the blueprint for all creation

*efficient* cause – how a thing comes to be, and the tools that bring things into being

*final* cause (*teleō*) – its function or purpose, and who is to enjoy that final outcome

So the expression *ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso omnia ipsi* carries with it the whole cosmological, and theological machinery and the expression speaks about both the *evolution* and *devolution* of the divine plan. Yet at the same time, *ex ipso* ... addresses the instantaneity of the creation, and at the same time, speaks about the *for-ever-coming-into-being* or the re-telling of the creation narrative.

One last observation about *Ipsō* is in order to be made here, and that is, that the terms used in this phrase are all pronouns: *himself*, *herself*, *itself*. It is to be noted that there is not a noun amongst the phrase. This omission might be due to the fact that no name whether proper or common can be assigned to the One. This namelessness of the name is an enigma which no doubt reflects the apophatic speechlessness of many including the Meister Eckhart to give a name to the divine, except to use impersonal descriptors such as *himself*, *herself* and *itself* to describe the indescribable. But still for all, the dynamism of those pronouns speaks to the power of the *Unknown*.

At first sight there seems to be no sexual imageries in the expression *quoniam ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso omnia ipsi*, but a closer look will show that the terms *ex ipso*, *per ipsum* and *ipsi*... are sexually-loaded. How, might that be, one may ask? Well, at the outset we notice that ‘out of’ or ‘from’ means an out-flowing, an outgrowth: that something was in something, but now it is ‘out’ of that something. In our case, this suggests ‘birth’ which is a creative, fertile and reproductive process.

The terms *ipso*, *ipsum* and *ipsi* imply life because of the genders: masculine, feminine and even neuter nouns that are embedded in those terms. Masculine is maleness – from the male comes the seed or semen. Female too has *seed*, but this type of seed it what needs to be fertilized in order to bring about life. For fertilisation to take place then, seeds have to come together whether artificially or biologically. This coming together and causing seeds to unite is a sexual activity. Sometimes this coming together may involve love, passion, and so forth; but these pre-conditions need not be.

However for this coming together to take place, there has to be an *out of*; there has to be a joining (a conjoining) and this involves sexual activity. Note also, that the neuter gender is an active player in sexual activity. This notion may now come as a surprise as to how something that is *neuter* can assist procreation, for *neutering* seems more akin to a-sexuality, infertility, sterility, celibacy, asceticism, and so forth.

But the neuter gender is quite the opposite, it actually assists in promoting sexuality. It sits between masculinity and femininity as a third force against which masculinity and femininity contest; and, in this type of dialectic, a combat between existence and non-existence, between sterility and fertility, between virginity and motherhood ensues, and out of this tension, life emerges. The sexuality that these terms imply are ontological ones. These terms speak of the generative and creative acts of God, who creates Himself, and from his *self-generatedness* or out of his richness<sup>251</sup> of his generative capacities, He automatically generates all things.<sup>252</sup>

He gives birth to his Word, to the Holy Spirit, and simultaneously births the whole creation. This creation is ‘out of him’, ‘for him’, ‘through him’ and ‘in him’. It is as if He is the great *cosmic egg* from whom all life hatches. In him, from him, etc.,

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<sup>251</sup> LWI *Op. trip* art., Prol. gen. n. 10, 155,1-5; LW I *Prol. in op. prop.* n. 21, 178,10-15; LW IV *Sermo* XXIX, n. 299, 266,7-10: ‘God is first flowingly rich, because he is one. Because he is the First and the Highest though being one. Therefore, the one descends into all and into every single one, while he remains one and uniting what is diverse. Therefore, six is not two times three, but six times one’ (‘Quia deus eo dives profusivus est, quia unus. Primus enim et supremus est ratione qua unus. Propter quod unum descendit in omnia et singula, manens semper unum et divisa uniens. Propter quod sex non sunt bis tria, sed unum sexies’).

<sup>252</sup> LWIV 302, 14-303, 2: “‘Rich through itself’ because it (the First) gives to all, gives everything and gives everything to all. It is “rich through itself” because it is sufficient and abundant, “and is the richest because of the abundance, overabundance, excess and overflow” (“dives per se”, quia dat omnibus, dat omnia, dat omnibus omnia. “dives per se” propter sufficientiam et abundantiam, “et est dives maius” sive “magis” propter copiam, superabundantiam et redundantiam sive effluxum”).

suggest intimacy, closeness and bonding. In him, there is movement towards and from, through him, suggests flow.

These actions are sexually-loaded, for *in*, *out*, *through*, *from*, *by*, all suggest genetic likeness and similarity. So just as a child carries the genetic make-up of his or her parents, that child having acquired the likeness of his parents, means that he/she has issued from them. That child has come about by the 'from' and in the 'out' processes where seeds, male and female unite to create a similar likeness to their own.

So *ipso*, etc., are metaphors that speak about love, oneness, fatherhood, motherhood, and by extension, the bearing of children. These terms speak also of the soul's relationship with God and the Birth of God in the Soul. This Birth of God in the soul deifies humanity and humanises divinity. Thus creation is homo-divinus and is about oneness where both the divine and human actors become partners in the productive enterprise.

I believe that the message that Eckhart wishes to convey to us by *ipso*, etc., is that humanity has to rise above self, above images, above its limitations and seize God in His private chamber. There the soul has to mate with Him, and so in turn becomes one with him. Eckhart alludes to this mating ritual by using very vivid sexual language. He says:

In the first beginning of the primal purity the Son had set up the pavilion of his everlasting glory, and he came out from there, from what was most exalted of all, because he wanted to exalt his beloved, whom the father had eternally betrothed with him, so that he might bring her back again into the exaltation from which she came ... that is why he came out, and came leaping like a young hart (Zach. 2:9) and suffered his torments for love, and he did not go out without wishing to go in again into his chamber with his bride. The chamber is the silent darkness of the hidden Fatherhood.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> DWI: 'Im ersten Beginn der ersten Lauterkeit, dort hat der Sohn das Zelt seiner ewigen Glorie aufgeschlagen und ist darum herausgekommen aus dem Allerhöchsten, weil er seine Freundin erhöhen wollte, die ihm der Vater von Ewigkeit her vermählt hatte, auf daß er sie zurückbrächte in das Allerhöchste, aus dem sie gekommen ist ... (Zach. 9,9). Darum also ging er aus und kam gesprungen wie ein Rehböcklein und erlitt seine Pein aus Liebe; und nicht ging er so aus, ohne wieder eingehen zu wollen mit seiner Braut in seine Kammer. Diese Kammer ist das stille Dunkel der verborgenen Vaterschaft'. Mod. Gr. transl. Quint, [para.2 lns..5-13],520. See also E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 196.

In the above very lyrical exposition about the Son and his bride Eckhart captures the intensity of sexual desire: the imageries of the Son leaping like a young hart; the torments of love, the craving for more erotic pleasures in the phrases *he did not go out without wishing to go in again*; the *bed-chamber*; the *silent darkness*; the *hidden Fatherhood* all suggest heightened sexual excitement.

The last expression, the *hidden Fatherhood* tells of the Son's need to generate his progeny. Now all these metaphors are highly suggestive of erotic encounters between two lovers, and although the language is shrouded under a poetico-theological veil, it is not hard to see the implied sexual meanings in the narrative.

So to conclude, these terms *ipso*, *ipsum*, *ipsi* and other related Latin pronouns all show a common bond between God and *all things*. So we are all a part of this grand scheme; part of the overarching plurality, and part of this *commonality*.

Importantly too, we are God's, or at any rate, a piece of God. This then is the narrative that these terms weave, and these terms are sexual markers – for they tell of *maleness*, *femaleness*, *neuterness* – about sexuality - and these realities are signposts pointing humanity to divinity, and on the other hand showing divinity the way back towards humanity. This sexuality will bring pleasure as well as pain, but that is the price of the bargain; and, one must accept whatever sexuality brings, for as Eckhart says: 'What God gives is his being, and his being is his goodness, and his goodness is his love. All sorrow and joy come from love'.

However, Eckhart realising that sorrow brings fear, adds: 'A man should not fear – the only fear that one should have is the fear of losing God – he should love God, for God loves man with all his supreme perfection'.<sup>254</sup>

Of course, one could reasonably argue that this supreme perfection involves his paternity, which is his fertile or procreative potentiality based on his Ground, a potential that we also share. For as Eckhart, in one of his *Commentaries on John* about 'showing us the father' (John 14:8) says: 'The Father is shown to us when we are joint fathers of God, fathers of the one Image .... What anyone meditates, thinks upon, and loves,

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid. 195.



becomes in him, and from him (and from it, and in it and out of it) a mental species, an image, a single offspring common to both'.<sup>255</sup>

Without over-extending, or over-vexing our imagination too much, we can safely say that we share with the Father this paternity or fatherhood potential; and that when this fatherhood potential becomes actually realisable, which in the case of God, is by his bubbling up and over,<sup>256</sup> and his begetting the many, but self-same images of himself; and in the case of we humans by the libidinal or sexual drives; then he and us become life-producing agents.

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<sup>255</sup> LWIII *Expositio s. evangelii sec. Iohannem*: 'Pater nobis ostenditur, quando dei compadres sumus ...quod enim quis meditatur, cogitat et amat, fit in ipso ex se ipso et ex illo et in illo et ab illo species, imago, proles una communis utriusque'. Karl Christ, Bruno Decker, Josef Koch, et al., Kohlhammer. (Stuttgart, 1994), 500, cap. 573. See also F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 191-92.

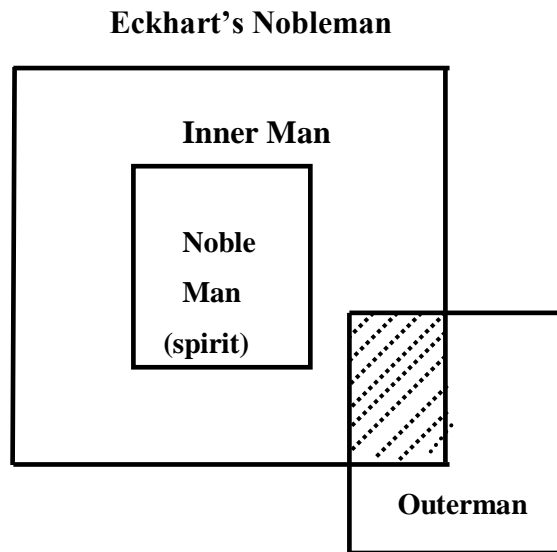
<sup>256</sup> Notions of *bullitio* and *ebullitio* (boiling and boiling-over) are suggested here.

## Chapter Four: The Nobleman

In the following chapter we will explore Eckhart sexual imageries by looking at some of his German and Latin works. We will begin with his vernacular homily *On the Nobleman* then move to some of his other well-known homilies, then come back to *On the Nobleman*.

Eckhart takes a Lucan parable about a Nobleman, and in an allegorical, tropological, and anagogical sense gives it a *spiritual* reworking that is unprecedented. The parable is taken from Luke 19:12 which Eckhart reads thus: ‘A *certain nobleman went away to a distant country to gain a kingdom for himself, and returned*’.<sup>257</sup>

The *Meister* at the outset appears to be advocating a dualistic approach in defining man as body and soul, yet this dualism is not what it seems to be, for in this apparent dualism that he enunciates, he also sees a trinity: body, soul, and spirit. Let us illustrate the elements of his nobleman.



Explanation of the chart showing various elements of Eckhart's nobleman:

1. The outer or larger figure (rectangle) is the Inner Man
2. The inside figure is the Noble Man (or the Spirit)
3. The lower figure on the right is the Outer Man

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<sup>257</sup> DWV *Von dem edeln menschen*; Josef Quint, 1963. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 105.

A further observation of the chart shows that the nobleman is untouched by the conflicts between the outer man and the inner man. However, the ‘shaded’ area of the inner man represents (a) elements of the outer man, and (b) elements of the inner man, and simultaneously, elements of the outer man are contained in the inner man (i.e. shaded area).

Eckhart further elaborates on the body in the following ways: ‘*One should first know, and it is in fact obvious, that man has two kinds of nature: body and spirit*’.<sup>258</sup> Spirit, in this first instance, seems to correspond to the soul. The body, he further informs us is the ‘outer man’ and the other entity is the ‘inner man’. The outer man has elements that make up the soul; and, similarly, the soul has elements that make up the body. So both soul and body have common elements that they each share, like ‘eye, ear, tongue, hand, and so on’ says Eckhart.

However, because Meister Eckhart often speaks in metaphors, obviously it must not be taken literally that the soul has physical features like eyes, ears, and so forth. The soul may be said to have these characteristics of course, but only metaphorically speaking. What Eckhart seems to mean, is that the soul, for instance, depends on physical sensations provided by the body in order that it can function as a sentient life – having faculties like intellect, consciousness, knowledge, understanding, will, and so forth – to work in the service of the nobleman. So soul and body therefore serve each other to form a corporate entity or a total being.

The Eckhartian view that although the soul and body conjoins, the soul does not share all the bodily experiences; this is a Neo-Platonic view supported by Plotinus who says:

We may treat of the Soul as in the body – whether it be set above it or actually within it – since the association of the two constitutes the one thing called the living organism, the Animate. Now from this relation, from the Soul using the body as an instrument, it does not follow that the Soul must share the body’s experiences: a man does not himself feel all the experiences of the tools with which he is working.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>259</sup> Plotinus *The Animate and the Man*, The First Ennead 1.3, transl. Stephen Mackenna and B. S. Page (Denton, 1952), 1-2.

Although recognising the importance of the soul-and-body union, at a sensory and appetitive level, Eckhart realises that the body is ‘hostile’ and ‘servile’ to the soul. However, there is another dimension to man which is untouched, or at least hardly affected by the conflicts that go on between the outer man and the inner man, and this additional and crucial dimension is the third man, which is the *inner man* of the soul who Eckhart calls the ‘heavenly man’ or the nobleman. This is the man he says “*whom our Lord means when he says: ‘A nobleman went away to a distant country, and gained a kingdom for himself, and returned’*”.<sup>260</sup> This man also represents the Spirit.

It is worth noting that Eckhart often switches words or substitutes them for a word or for other words. He frequently mixes metaphors; so it would do well for us not to be locked into any particular meaning of some of these terms. For instance, when he speaks about the soul, he could easily mean the spirit, and *vice versa*. He calls the inner man ‘Adam’. When he refers to the noble man, he has various metaphors for it such as the ‘good tree’, ‘good fruits’ and so forth. He restates his ideas constantly. So with these substitutions, and the fluidity of his language, we would be wise not to hold onto any particular term about the noble man and treat it as if it is the only single or sacrosanct meaning or definition for that term.

What seems clear however, is that he has overcome the traditional Platonic notion of the dualistic nature of man – as warring body and soul – where the body is an unnecessary appendage of, and obstacle to the soul’s progress, a baggage that needs to be discarded as early as possible in order that the soul may arrive as soon as possible at divine union. Not so with Eckhart; he sees the body as a necessary partner of the soul which under the direction and the control of the nobleman will display and demonstrate charity, kindness – in short, all the virtues – that will enable the nobleman to be actively engaged with his neighbour, and to be involved in the world, but at the same time, not to be of the world.

#### 4.1 Sexual imageries

“Concerning this inner, nobleman in whom God’s seed and God’s Image are impressed and sown”, Eckhart relates that “... God’s image, God’s Son, is in the

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid. 105.

ground of the soul like a living fountain’’.<sup>261</sup> The question now is: What is this image that is impressed and sown? For it is from this engraving or this fertilizing of the seed in the soul that God’s son appears. These words *appear* and *manifest*<sup>262</sup> are not just throw-away words, but these terms bespeak of something of an extraordinary, miraculous or revelatory nature that evokes wonder and awe.

The image that is impressed and sown leads to the divinisation or deification of man. However, God’s image is more than a replication or recreation of man’s apparent physical resemblance to God. Foremost then, God’s image is where man has the ‘likeness’ of God. This likeness has ontological properties or qualities, and these are otherwise transcendental properties, and they include, but are not limited to intellect, goodness, existence, unity, love, justice, truth, and so forth: these properties constitute the very marrow or root of Being – God’s Being, and now, by virtue of the Nobleman re-discovering himself, he also becomes that Being, that is, God’s image.

Pre-eminently then for Eckhart, because of his Neoplatonic leanings, he would have us to understand that God’s image is essentially mind (*nous*) or specifically, *intellect*. Eckhart, sees God’s image or His likeness in the soul as Intellect, and he also being mindful of St. John, sees this Intellect as λόγος (Logos) or the Word (John 1:1). Eckhart has many imageries to describe God’s image which is simultaneously His Son and that of the Soul, but whatever imageries or metaphors he uses, the birthing process, which is a concomitant result of divine union with the soul, is what is being specified. He refers to God’s image, God’s Son in the ground of the soul, and compares them to a living fountain.

First, with this metaphor, we see the qualifier *living* placed in front of the water symbol – a fountain. Why is it necessary to place *living* in front of fountain? Well, over and above the obvious fact that water is the basis of life, in the spiritual sphere likewise, water holds a pre-eminently esteemed place in religious liturgy and practice, e.g. baptism. Water represents eternal life as Jesus powerfully announced to the *Woman of Samaria*:<sup>263</sup> Eckhart although he does not call her as such, refers to her.<sup>264</sup> He says: ‘We

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid. 108.

<sup>262</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>263</sup> ‘Jesus answered and said unto her, whosoever drinks of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life’ (John 4:13,14).

read of a woman who requested this gift (the divine nature and living water of eternal life) from God. The woman said, “Sir, give me of the water”. Then our Lord said, “Bring me your husband”, and she said, “Sir, I have none”. But you have five, and one you have now is not yours’.<sup>265</sup>

So God’s image represents life in the here and now – this is man’s physicality; but, this is only a temporal state, and the temporal things need replenishing as they pass away moment by moment. Living means activity, not just contemplation. Living means spiritual life performed, but performed not just in the cloisters of a monastery or nunnery, but work also performed in the outside community.

This fountain is living in contra-distinction to a dead fountain or dead water. So living means, life, fruitfulness, fertility, fecundity, wholesomeness, purity, healthiness and goodness. These are therefore some of the characteristics of God’s image – i.e., the Son, and the Soul – these are animate – not inanimate – qualities, and so they are the source of all life and vitality. The word fountain suggests continuous activities like gushing, springing, bubbling, outflowing, vivifying, sustaining and so forth; these descriptions then, where Eckhart is concerned are some of the qualities of God’s image in the soul, and also the energies or actions that drive the cosmos.

With the metaphor ‘fountain’, Eckhart gives a descriptor of the soul, and of course, the soul generally has traditionally been viewed as life and sometimes viewed as female.

Contrasting the fountain with the nobleman’s inner man, Eckhart refers to Origen: Origen, the great master in a parable [says]:

God’s image, God’s son is in the depths of the soul, like a living fountain. But if someone throws earth on it (which is earthly desire) that prevents and covers it so that it is not detected and it is not evident; yet it remains alive within, and when the earth that was thrown on it from the outside is removed, it reappears and is seen.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> DWIV/1, *Pr.* 103: ‘Des hân wir ein glîchnisse in dem êwangelîô, dô unser herre ûf dem brunnen vil minniclîche geredete mit der vrouwen und si irn kruoc liez und lief in die stat und kundete dem volke, daz der wære Messias komen wære’. ‘We have a parable in the Gospel when our Lord had spoken in such friendly fashion to the Gentile woman at the well, she left her pitcher and ran to the town announcing to the people that the true Messiah had come’. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 40.

<sup>265</sup> DWII *Pr.* 37 *Vir meus servus tuus mortuus est*, Josef Quint, (1971), 676/211-213, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 229.

<sup>266</sup> DWV *Vom Edlen Menschen*, J. Quint (1963) [para. 6.1-19], 500.

Eckhart suggests that the fountain is source; it is ground; it is life; it is God's image. This life source with its several descriptors including soul, has implanted within it, 'God's seed': that is to say, the soul has God's semen and God's image implanted in it. Because of the implantation of God's semen in the soul, it resembles God; and as such, there is a genetic link which nowadays we term *DNA* between God and the soul. What is emerging so far from this discussion about fountain, is that terms like seed, image, sown, ground, living, earth, and earthy desire which are all part of our everyday language, undergird and drive sexuality. It is these same sexually palpable terms then that Eckhart uses to characterise the soul's relationship to the divine.

It is interesting to note that Eckhart in citing Origen refers to the phrase *earthly desire*. This expression earthly desire is very laden with sensual meanings. On one hand, it is used as a metaphor for dirt which can cover over the soul, or dirt that blocks the spring from which water gushes. Likewise, earthly desire or dirt has other connotations of course, like desire or lust for wealth, power, etc. However in the context of Eckhart's exposition on the Nobleman's 'going out' and 'returning with a kingdom', the phrase could reasonably be construed to mean sexual desire. Let me elucidate: It ought to be noted here that the biography of the Nobleman is so rich in all kinds of imageries, that for us to try and ascribe only one set of meanings or interpretations to it would fail to appreciate the full range of its didactic and epistemological richness.

Let me explain. At one level of meaning, it could be argued that Eckhart's Nobleman seems conflicted within himself; that he is wrestling with another man – the outer man; much like Paul had to contend with his 'thorn in the flesh'.<sup>267</sup> So the nobleman appears to be a dual man. It could further be argued that the Nobleman's journey when set against the background of the Pauline lament, 'Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this mortal flesh and body' (Rom.7:24) a text which

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<sup>267</sup> We don't know that this 'thorn in the flesh' is except to say that Paul describes it as 'infirmities'. But a close reading between the lines suggests to me that it was not so much a sexual problem, but perhaps a psycho-physical impediment; rather a hallucinatory or epileptic problem. So he probably suffered from 'febrile convulsions' of 'fit'. Recall, that it was this same Paul who was struck down in the noonday-blinding sun on the way to Damascus to persecute the Christians. (Acts 9:1-3). So because of that heatstroke, he had recurring bouts of these convulsions. However, whatever his ailments or stigma were, and despite his three petitions to God to have them removed (because he thought that they were visitations of Satan), they were not removed. He therefore, resigned himself to 'glory' in his 'infirmities' so that 'Christ's strength be made perfect in his weakness'. (2 Cor.12:7-10)

Eckhart cites,<sup>268</sup> that such cry of Paul's suggests that there is really a battle-royal taking place between flesh and spirit; that a fight rages to tame the body's appetites and to achieve purity of the spirit.

It is also possible that this apparent conflict between the old man and the new man, on one hand, could mirror Eckhart's own conflict within himself where he is wrestling between desire and denial; and, on the other hand, that the contest between asceticism and sexual desire reflects a greater struggle that the Nobleman experiences as he embarks on his return journey to secure a kingdom.

Whatever meaning we attribute to the Nobleman's adventure, it appears to be an allegory about the soul's essential qualities – its God-like status – and its attempt to achieve an epiphany. This struggle may be further exemplified by Eckhart's reference to descriptors like sinful, evil, devilish; all of which are theological terms that are attributed to an 'evil spirit'. Eckhart further reports: 'The same evil spirit keeps constant dialogue with the outer man, and through him he is always secretly plotting after the inner man; and just as the snake chatted with his wife Eve, and she chatted with the man, so he through her, got her man'. (Gen. 3:1-6)<sup>269</sup>

This allusion to Adam and Eve is a reference to the Fall where sexual conflicts come to the fore, for within the Fall myth, is contained the abiding belief by some of the early shapers of Church doctrines, not least saints like Jerome and Augustine, that the eating of the *forbidden fruit* was a sexual act, and this act was sinful.

Although, the notion of original sin is not our brief here, and one is not sure that Eckhart subscribed to this fallen-state-of-humanity thesis; nonetheless, it is worth noting that sexual undertones are involved in the Fall myth; and, these sexual motifs pervade much theological thinking even in our time, where it is still believed in some quarters, that the original sexual act, or the desire to perform such an act led to man's demise from that golden era of purity and innocence. That man's fall from *grace to disgrace* was a result of concupiscence, or that 'illicit' love-affair between the original pair. So because of this idiosyncratic view about concupiscence, there developed a sexual rigorism that created a body/soul divide – a homo/divinus rift; and so, this

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<sup>268</sup> DWV *Vom edlen Menschen*, J. Quint, (1963) [para. 2, lns.5-6], 499. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 106.

<sup>269</sup> DWV *Vom Edlen Menschen* [para. 5, lns.7-19], 498-499.



primordial sexual act was also emblematic of the theological chasm between God and man.

This interpretation of the narrative of the Nobleman then seems riddled with Manichean and Pauline angst, and indeed seems a plausible hypothesis, especially when further tensions surrounding the Nobleman's character are revealed by the following statement:

To the outer man belongs all that is attached to the soul but embraced by and mixed with the flesh, and cooperating with and in each bodily member such as the eye, the ear, the tongue, the hand, and so on. And scripture calls all that, the old man, the earthly man, the outward man, the hostile man, the servile man.<sup>270</sup>

However, this apparent dualism in the character of the Nobleman is perhaps not what it seems to be at all, but essentially, it may be a recognition on the part of Eckhart that the soul needs the succour and comfort of the body's members – its eyes, ears and so on – and, that the body and soul are an integrated whole. So rather than there being a war of the body against the soul, both entities cooperate for the good of the Nobleman, and so he is a single and undivided entity.

This last construction that the nobleman is a monistic entity might be as tenable as any other counter position, because what we seem to be able to adduce from Eckhart's theology, is that it is unlikely that he had such a dismal view of sexuality, like that of some of the other scholastics; and that his reasons for citing what some might see as a struggle between the flesh and the spirit is an instructional tool designed to promote spiritual growth.

His account about the steps towards spiritual progress, although he acknowledges Augustine's work in this field as shown by Vinzent,<sup>271</sup> Eckhart's model is not an Augustinian one, where for Augustine, in order for the soul to arrive at union with God, it has to proceed through six initial stages until finally the seventh stage is reached. This is where the skin of the outer man (the old man) so to speak is peeled off to reveal the beautiful core, as it were, of the inner man (or new man). Not so for Eckhart, for he compresses Augustine seven stages of spiritual progress into his first stage, as mentioned above, and the rest of Eckhart's five stages is where the inner man

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid. [para. 3] 498. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 105.

<sup>271</sup> See M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 113-165.

who has already been formed at stage one (not at stage seven as in Augustine's case) embarks on the road to divine union.

But leaving aside Eckhart's six stages,<sup>272</sup> and the anthro-theological ascent of the soul to the divine realm (where the outer man who has already jettisoned his outward appendages at stage one, and now takes-off to the highest stage to become a child of God); Eckhart's inner man's heavenly trajectory is an allegory about the journey of the soul (a) after it has divested itself of 'earthly desires' and (b) is making progress towards its ultimate destination – unification with Divine.

Eckhart seems to speak metaphorically about the nobleman's quest for divine immortality just like Scripture speaks metaphorically about the Bride in *Song*. That is to say, for inasmuch as Eckhart believes that the brown colour of the Bride in *Song* 1:5, is not a racial epithet levelled at her by some assumed detractors, but rather the colour question is really a state of mind or being – a distracting influence – which functions to conceal the bride's shape, form, beauty, purity and desirability; he uses the colour pigmentation issue that surrounds the Bride, as just a metaphor for the earthly desires that cloud 'the image of God within us'.<sup>273</sup>

Eckhart's six stages is the unfolding of Augustine's seventh stage. This final stage which will only be achieved in the divine life; yet, for Eckhart this is not an eschatological moment beyond this earthly life, but it is present in "there" [i.e., 6<sup>th</sup> for Eckhart; 7<sup>th</sup> for Augustine] which is also the here-and-now. '...and "there" there is eternal rest and bliss, for the final end of the inner man and the new man is eternal

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<sup>272</sup> Eckhart's stages: This journey is a six-stage one of the inner man and the outer man (or the soul) towards union with the divine. Below, the journey is briefly outlined.

**Stage one:** The nobleman or the soul is dependent upon his spiritual parents, and has to prop himself up against walls and chairs for support; and like a young child, he depends on milk for nourishment.

**Stage Two:** Although still dependent on his spiritual parents, the noble man along his journey now goes on his own quest in search of God; and as he does so, he crawls further and further away from his mother's lap looking up and smiling at his heavenly Father as he makes these independent and exploratory steps.

**Stage Three:** As he becomes more independent, self-supporting and knowledgeable, he leaves his mother's lap totally, casting-off his fears; and now being able to cope as a grown-up is able to discriminate between right and wrong.

**Stage Four:** He is now a mature adult, and like a mature person, he is able to withstand, even to welcome the trials and temptations of life.

**Stage Five:** Here, he is unflappable, and he possesses wisdom. He is thus detached and this barrenness leads to,

**Stage Six:** Where he is now 'de-formed', that is, 'en-formed' or 'transformed' into 'the child of God'.

<sup>273</sup> DW V *Vom edlen menschen*, J. Quint, [para. 3, l. 4], 591.

life'.<sup>274</sup> Augustine's missing seventh stage is in fact contained in Eckhart's stages 2-6, because for the latter, life is no longer divided between a bodily outer journey and a spiritual movement outside of the body, but body and soul, senses and intellect are mutually dependent and cannot be separated. As a result, the body in Eckhart is no mirror of evil, but a mirror of the intellectual mirror of the divine.

As has been shown, there are numerous and obvious references to sexual imageries in the *Nobleman*: some are explicit while others are more subtle, some are real while others are metaphorical; some sexual imageries are mundane, while others sublime. But when they are all taken together in their entirety, they convey a sensuality that relates to the divine. The sexual imageries leap out at us from the pages of the *Nobleman*.<sup>275</sup> Here are a few of them: mother's lap,<sup>276</sup> subsists on milk,<sup>277</sup> smile up at his heavenly Father, and other physical and figurative expressions like flesh,<sup>278</sup> Adam, Eve, serpent, wooed,<sup>279</sup> and the good tree bringing forth good fruits.

Additional sexual imageries include: the field in which God has sown His seed, impressed and impregnated it;<sup>280</sup> members of the body including eyes, ears, tongue,<sup>281</sup> child of God, divine nature, divine being. God's Son, the ground, the soul like a living fountain, earthly desire, living streams appear, the sun always shining, the artist creating a statue, women's head covered, men's head bare. More bodily and also sexual expressions include, God's bare image,<sup>282</sup> God's birth, bare and naked in the naked soul.<sup>283</sup> Shapely, beautiful,<sup>284</sup> I am the first and the last, virgins and maidens, espoused, chaste virgins,<sup>285</sup> man who comes from earth (humus), pure life, creatures, the flower

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid. 108 [Walshe, *Nobleman*, vol.111].

<sup>275</sup> DWV *Vom edlem menschen*.

<sup>276</sup> '... kriecht der Mutter aus dem Schoß' (crawls out of the womb of the mother), [para. 1], 500.

<sup>277</sup> '... sich noch mit Milch labt' (still refreshes with milk) [para. 4], 499.

<sup>278</sup> '... dem Fleische' (the flesh) [para.3], 498.

<sup>279</sup> '... die Schlange mit Frau Eva plauderte und durch sie mit dem Manne Adam' (the serpent wooed Lady Eve and through her the man Adam) [para 3], 498.

<sup>280</sup> 'diesen Samen eingesät und eingedrückt und eingeboren hat' (since God has sown this seed) [para. 3], 499.

<sup>281</sup> 'Auge, dem Ohr, der Zunge, der Hand' (eye, ear, tongue, hand) [para. 3], 498.

<sup>282</sup> '... ist dies, daß die Seele Gott unverhüllt schaut' (the soul sees God unveiled or naked) [para 1], 503.

<sup>283</sup> 'das ist bloßes Bild Gottes, Gottes Geburt, unverdedd bloß in entblößter Seele' (God's bare image, God's birth, bare and naked in the soul) [para. 2], 501.

<sup>284</sup> 'Ich bin doch schon und wohlgestaltet' (for I am shapely and beautiful, or *for I'm well-built and designed*) [para. 3], 501.

<sup>285</sup> '... keusche Jungfrauen dem Einen angetraut und verlobt' (chaste virgins betrothed and married to the One) [para. 2], 502.

and kernel of bliss,<sup>286</sup> felicity is seeing God naked, being, life, love, natural order. Nature makes a man out of a child, and a hen out of an egg, but God makes the man before the child and the hen before the egg.<sup>287</sup> God gives all creatures their being, the eagle taking away and pith and marrow.<sup>288</sup>

How are all these expressions then sexual imageries? Do they not strain credulity to believe that they are all sexually laden? Is one not over-reading into the text things which are not there? These are all valid questions that one may reasonably ask. However, the one answer to all these questions is this: In order to explain the continuous power of the divine seed within the inner man, Eckhart introduces an irresistible dynamism to grow.

What is 'like a spring of living water' can sometimes be reduced and partly blocked, but never dries out, is and remains alive and is always in command. Eckhart uses three metaphors to underline this persistence drive; one, the already quoted text by Origen that God's Son 'is in the ground of the soul like a spring of living water,' another one: that 'the sun ... shines without end' and a third one: how a sculptor works. They all share this authoritative energy that emerges and becomes creative out of its own being.<sup>289</sup>

To conclude, these sexual imageries generally found in Eckhart including those particularly found in the *Nobleman*, consist of expressions like 'living fountain', all display active, dynamic, organic, creative, fertile, and regenerative forces. These forces serve as metaphors for life; and, without a doubt, the generation and continuation of life has at its root, quintessentially some form of sexuality.

#### **4.2 The *noblewomen's* sexuality: Eve, the Bride of the Song, Mary and Martha, Rachel and Leah**

In contrast to the Nobleman, there is the feminine side of the Nobleman. This *alter ego* of the Nobleman is *Der Edlen Frau* (The Noblewoman). She is a type who

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<sup>286</sup> '... daß Blume und Kern der Seligkeit in jener Erkenntnis liegen' (the flower and core of bliss) [para. 1], 503.

<sup>287</sup> 'Die Natur macht den Mann aus dem Kinde und das Huhn aus dem Ei; Gott aber macht den Mann vor dem Kinde und das Huhn vor dem Ei Natu'. (He makes a man out of a child and a hen out of an egg, but God makes the man before the child and the hen before the egg) [para. 1], 504.

<sup>288</sup> '... das Mark oder den Kern des höchstens Baumes' (pith and core [marrow] of the highest tree) [para.4], 504.

<sup>289</sup> M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 149.

represents all women. In addition, these actual, metaphorical, spiritual or theological attributes of these noblepersons, both man and woman represent a *living fountain*. Living fountain is a term that contains sexual imageries.<sup>290</sup>

The expression *living fountain* has a sexual refrain to it, and that the fountain analogy has both male and female connotations. On one hand, the male part of the fountain, i.e. *living*, is what, if the female – not least someone of the *Woman of Samaria* notoriety – drinks from, she will never thirst again. This implies, that her sexual desires will no longer be merely physical and erotic, but that, they will be transformed into something spiritual, and all her several husbands and other lovers – her attachments – will fall away, as she now becomes detached, that is, having a ‘faithful and monogamous’ relationship with the divine *One*.

At this stage, rightly interpreting Eckhart, the Birth of the Son occurs in her Soul, and simultaneously, she is born back into the heart of God. This is where the *divine embrace* takes place between God and the Soul; and this divine embrace is akin to slaking one’s thirst by drinking the living water that Christ had promised not only to the Samaritan woman, but that He also promised to ‘any man who thirsts for this living water. For out of his belly – meaning the seat of his inmost *desires* – would ‘flow rivers of living water’.<sup>291</sup>

Here we have very physical, sensual language or imageries dramatically and urgently being used by these expressions: *thirsts*, *belly*, *feast*, and *rivers of living waters*. These expressions are metaphors for the sexual forces behind life, forces which are urgent and which are captured by Eckhart’s use of the phrase ‘living fountain’.<sup>292</sup> Living fountain now becomes an ontological operative variable which signals the moral and spiritual condition of the Nobleman and the *Noblewoman’s* soul in relationship to God.

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<sup>290</sup> For in the telling of the story of Jesus and the Woman of Samaria, John tells us that: “The woman saith unto him, ‘Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw’. Jesus saith unto her, ‘Go, call thy husband, and come hither’. The woman answered and said, ‘I have no husband’. Jesus said unto her, ‘Thou hast well said, I have no husband: For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly...’”. (John 4:15-18).

<sup>291</sup> Here was another occasion - the last and greatest day of a festival - when this living water was alluded to and powerfully promised by Jesus (John 7:37-38).

<sup>292</sup> Bd. V *Von dem edeln menschen*, J. Quint, 1963. Cf. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 108.

For Eckhart further discloses the fact: ‘ ... that the nobleman receives and draws all his being, life and bliss from God, by God and in God alone and bare, and not from knowing, seeing or loving God or anything like that’.<sup>293</sup> The underlying assumption behind the Nobleman or *Noblewoman’s* biography is that not only does his or her nobility represent the soul, but that this soul when impregnated with God’s seed, herself becomes God’s off-spring.

In other words, (using modern-day biological reproductive information) the soul is as it were, an *egg* or even an *ovum* which God’s seed (*samen*) fertilizes. That is to say, the fertile ground of the Soul (the ovum) which is the inner man when it is impregnated by God’s *sperm* conceives God’s image. However, the insemination of God’s seed in the ground of the soul – the inner nobleman – sometimes, and again, to use a human reproductive example, shows no obvious signs of *pregnancy* – the pregnancy might seem like a *false positive*. That is to say, that although pregnancy has occurred, tests incorrectly show that there is no pregnancy; but, in reality, pregnancy has occurred.

Now, when there is a report of false pregnancy in the human reproductive cycle, this is likened to what happens in Eckhartian *theo-biology* – where, although the Son is born in the Soul, this fact, is not readily apparent, for the reason that Eckhart gives: That ‘earth is thrown on a living fountain’; but that ‘when the earth is removed, the living streams will reappear’.<sup>294</sup> This means, that the soul, although shrouded by, or cloaked in human weaknesses, failings and ignorance – some of which might theologically or morally be referred to as ‘sin’ – despite the soul’s encrustation with, and accumulation of human dross, ‘earthly desire’<sup>295</sup> says Eckhart, it nevertheless contains divine properties.

The soul is invested with, and is encased in the glory of God. The soul is made or even *un-made* of eternal *stuff*, and as such, it is indestructible, for it belongs to God and is *God*. Because of the soul’s ‘uncreatedness’ this is why Eckhart implies ‘that the soul is also God’ (*Darin trägt die Seele das göttliche Bild und ist Gott gleich*).<sup>296</sup> This

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid. 108-109.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. 108.

<sup>296</sup> DWI Pr.16(b) *Quasi vas auri solidum ornatum omni lapide pretioso*, transl. Josef Quint, Predigten, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 1958-1986), 492/21.

declaration in effect says that: 'It [the gold vessel or soul] bears the divine image, and God is also the same as the soul'.<sup>297</sup>

As is the case in the human sexual and biological sphere, pregnancy will be seen to prove positive and progressing normally, as the foetus in the womb experiences certain natural hormonal, physiological, biological, emotional, and other normal developmental changes that accompany gestation; and, in due course, a child will be born. The above physical reproductive analogies mirror the Eckhartian's theological and ontological mantra, 'The Birth of the Son in the Soul', which now becomes a spiritual process that reflects the soul's spiritual childbirth, and the soul's gradual attainment of divine union.

The central importance of the soul's terrain is mapped out here by Eckhart who says, and I will paraphrase him:

This soul is the ground in which the good farmer, the inner man, the fruitful tree (in contrast to the bad farmer, the barren tree or the outer man) is planted. It is here in the ground – the soul – that the good farmer who is wise and industrious, plants God's seed, and in turn, in whom God plants his seed. The seed flourishes abundantly and grows up towards God, whose seed it is, and the fruit is akin to God's nature. The seed that is planted reproduces its own likeness. So for instance, the seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, that of a nut tree into a nut tree, and the seed of God grows into God.<sup>298</sup>

Furthermore, the centrality of the soul's position is shown by Vinzent, who notes that:

Eckhart develops a full theology of the birth and its place: God giving birth to his Son in our soul – and the other way around: us giving birth to God's Son in our own soul, according to many scholars the most prominent and important idea of Eckhart, which informs all his other ideas... For Eckhart, divine birth is the link where anthropology and theology, but also human and divine nature, come together not only in a co-operative way, but in a singularity, where God's potentiality and activity are the same as human potentiality and activity.<sup>299</sup>

Eckhart freely plays with the masculine and feminine forms of the pronoun, sometimes subverting them, and making them interchangeable. For instance, the nobleman at times is masculinised, but at other times he is feminised when he

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<sup>297</sup> DW I *Pr.* 16(b): Walshe's transl. of Eckhart's statement says: 'There the soul bears God's image and is like God'. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I 124. Other references to the soul and God being same are to be found in DW II *Pr.* 30 of Walshe's vol. I 148; DW II *Pr.* 46 of Walshe's vol. II 28; DW II *Pr.* 59 of Walshe's vol. II, 183.

<sup>298</sup> DW V *Von dem edeln menschen*, Josef Quint, 1963. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 107.

<sup>299</sup> M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 119.

represents the soul. Evidence of these gender shifts can for instance be found in the story of the man (whom we have already encountered, see Cap.1.2) who had prepared an evening feast to which invitations were sent to selected guests to attend the banquet. Several of the invitees declined the man's invitation giving a variety of reasons why they could not come.<sup>300</sup> The third person to decline the invitation gave his reason for not attending the dinner as this: 'He had taken a wife and could not come'. Eckhart sets this rejection against the background of the soul's *bi-sexuality*. He says that: 'The soul is wholly male when she turns to God. When the soul faces downwards, she is called "woman", but when one knows God in Himself and seeks Him at home, the soul is a man.'<sup>301</sup>

He further informs us that cross-dressing, or man putting on woman's clothes or a woman putting on man's clothes was forbidden 'in the old law', but now evidently, he implies that cross-dressing is allowed under the new law, and in an allegorical fashion he justifies this type of sexual conduct by explaining that: 'She is a man when she penetrates simply into God without means. But when she looks out here at all, then she is a woman'.<sup>302</sup> Now, the soul (which is usually feminine) is male when she turns to God.

However, the soul by facing downwards, and by looking out (rather than by looking within) and by being governed by the five senses becomes a woman. However, the soul becomes a man when it penetrates simply into God – penetrates without mediations or interventions – without *contraceptive* devices – this allows for conception. Likewise, the soul, the intellectual part of it, is a man, when it turns to God. But the soul when it turns downwards becomes a woman.<sup>303</sup> Hidden in these turns of phrases, appropriate sexual motifs may well be couched in these imageries.

Now, the guests who declined the man's feast (this man who is nameless is a metaphor for the apophatic God) were the souls who having lost their masculinity – the intellect – cannot come to the feast.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, the soul's bisexual nature is

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<sup>300</sup> DW 1 Pr.20(a) and Pr. 20(b) transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 235-245.

<sup>301</sup> DW I Pr.20 (a) transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 239.

<sup>302</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>303</sup> DW I Pr. 20(b) transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 245.

<sup>304</sup> Op. cit.



evidenced by this further observation of Eckhart's: 'Thus, whatever of the soul turns downwards receives a covering, a kerchief, from what it turns to; but that in the soul that turns upwards, that is God's bare image, God's birth, bare and naked in the naked soul'.<sup>305</sup>

So we may summarize the soul's sexual nature by the following categorisation:

- (a) Downwards = female with head covered
- (b) Upwards = male head uncovered

The downwards-soul, looks outwards and represents woman. This soul of course has virtues and good religious practices, but still it falls short of the image of God. The upwards-soul turns inwards to God, and thus has God's bare Image; God's birth; God's nakedness in the naked soul.

Now, with these turns of expressions we find some provocative and sexually-laden vocabulary. Eckhart refers to aspects of woman's clothing – a headscarf or 'kerchief' – as a form of veil that she has to wear to show a humble and quiet disposition and submissiveness to the man. At face value, this type of expectation for a woman might seem offensive to modern readers, for Eckhart might appear to side with Paul's alleged 'misogynistic and sexist attitudes'.<sup>306</sup>

However, such a supposition is just that – a supposition. For clearly in Romans 16, Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome, he commends Phebe to the church. He also asks the church to greet Priscilla who along with her husband, Aquila were his great helpers. He further asks that several other women in the church be greeted. Such recognition of the importance of these women is not suggestive of a misogynistic attitude on the part of Paul. So we are more likely to believe that the letter to Titus, because it goes against the grain of Romans 16, is pseudepigraphical.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> DW V *Von dem edeln menschen*; Josef Quint, 1963. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 109.

<sup>306</sup> KJV: 1 Titus 2:11, 12, 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence'; 1 Cor.14: 33, 34, 'Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church'.

<sup>307</sup> According to the letter itself, it was written by the Apostle Paul to Titus on Crete, from which Paul had left. Yet, this letter is generally regarded as pseudonymous, written after the death of Paul by an anonymous writer who sought to impersonate Paul in a post-Pauline situation. (See Dr. Arland J.

It therefore seems unlikely that Eckhart had any biases against women, for the literature shows that as a Dominican monk, he was administratively and pastorally in charge of the spiritual needs and social welfare of many nuns, and various other female orders ensconced in nunneries, and in other religious houses (e.g., Cistercian Monastery Mariengarten at Cologne and the Female Benedictine Monastery of S. Machabaeorum, Cologne).<sup>308</sup>

Eckhart's metaphoric use of the terms: downward-looking and upward-looking souls are figural expressions intended to show the arduous path towards divine love. So the downward-looking-outwards soul means that the soul is not completely detached. But the upwards-inward-looking soul is free of encumbrances. Although the soul here seems to be dual, it is really a uni-sex soul, or more accurately, an a-typical soul, and genderless – neither male nor female. So the same soul simultaneously is looking-out-and-looking in; looking-downward-and-looking-upward.

The soul is like a mirror which sees its reflection when it views itself in the mirror, but the reflection goes when the soul no longer looks in the mirror. This mirror reflects the gender-neutral aspects of the soul; but the mirror is really God. Therefore in this mirror there are no inferior or superior parts of the soul. This mirror does not, and cannot make this distinction of superiority or inferiority within the soul because this distinction does not exist – for the soul is the abode of God; and He knows no division or distinction. The distinction of the soul and God's indistinction are the same. That is, according to Eckhart's *inquantum* principle, the soul *insofar* as it simultaneously exists with God along with all created things *in principio*, is always with God, for as Eckhart says:

... we are an only Son, whom the Father has eternally borne. When the Father begot all creatures, he begot me, and I flowed forth with all creatures while remaining within the Father.<sup>309</sup>

Or again, as Eckhart says:

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[www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=917](http://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=917) [Accessed June 2013]

<sup>308</sup> See M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011). Also O. Davies, 'Eckhart and the pastoral care of women', in Meister Eckhart's *Mystical Theologian*, 68-72.

<sup>309</sup> DW I 381-382, Pr. 22, transl. M.O.C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 61.

... when a man accommodates himself barely to God, with love, he is unformed, then informed and transformed in the divine uniformity wherein he is one with God.<sup>310</sup>

So in this case there is indistinction or *univocity* with God. And yet again, according to the same *inquantum* principle, both God and the soul's indistinction is *distinct* in that the soul emanates from God, and remains in God due to the following prescription:

When we say that all things are in God this means that just as he is indistinct in his nature and nevertheless most distinct, from all things, so in him all things in a most distinct way are also indistinct.<sup>311</sup>

This distinction comes about by what McGinn calls 'our existence as created beings', and to paraphrase him, we are analogically God by virtue of our 'adoption and participation in God'.<sup>312</sup> He further adds, that there is an 'indissoluble link between the homonification of God and the divinisation of man', and this relation is achieved by the Incarnation.

Conventionally, the soul is feminised. But this is a sign of the soul's fertility; and, a soul now receptive, ready for childbearing, and when impregnated with the male sperm, in this case, God's seed, she conceives. Thus, a divine Son is born in the soul. Now, this incarnation not only unites the divine with the human, but also in turn, causes the divine to become human, and also allows the human to become divine. For as Eckhart says using St. John as an authority, '*God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God*'.<sup>313</sup> (1 John 4:16) This relationship or union with God does several things:

1. Generates the intellectual life of the soul, where birth always take place in time and in eternity
2. Makes us sons of God through the birth of the Son in the soul
3. Accords to the soul the same essence that the Son has
4. Makes the soul imageless and detached

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<sup>310</sup> DW 2:272-81 *Pr.* 40, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 119.

<sup>311</sup> LW IV 27.10-28.1.

<sup>312</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>313</sup> DW III *Pr.* 65, 'Got ist diu minne, und der in der mine wonet, der wonet in gote und got in im'. Josef Quint (1976), 95/1. See transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 49.

5. Reaffirms man's two-fold birth process: (a) Into the world (natural), (b) Out of the world (spiritual)
6. Facilitates fruitfulness and reciprocity between God and the soul: For just as a child is born naked, so is the soul born naked in God
7. Allows for love and joy which are radiated in the soul when the child is born in the soul
8. Installs in the soul the divine essence; and although the lower powers of anger, sorrow, sadness exist, they can cause the soul no grief, just as they can cause God no grief
9. Recognises the soul's nothingness, and because of union with the One, she bears her trials with equanimity.

The above checklist aptly summarizes the corpus of Eckhart's theological and metaphysical positions; and, it is upon this bedrock that his iconic 'Birth of the Son in the Soul' theme – that procreative, fertile, organic and dynamic relationship between the soul and God – is founded.

Eckhart's sexual language is laden with highly charged, suggestive, sensuous and evocative imageries which are likely to excite the passions and stoke desires; but, such language is only intended to incite, or inflame the soul's desire for union with God; and, for the soul to experience the ecstasy of divine love. Some of these sexually-telling imageries are expressions like, 'the serpent wooed Lady Eve'. Here, this serpent 'more [subtle] than any beast' (Gen. 3: 1) seduces, tempts or allures Eve to do things that are forbidden, despite the fact of the grand title of *Lady* that she has. Her courtly or noble stature does not insure her against – rather it makes her more vulnerable – to temptation, and her yielding to it.

Likewise, in a male-dominant society, which assumes that the female sex is 'weak' and susceptible to undue influences, it comes as no surprise then, that *Lady Eve* would have been the first line of attack by the serpent. However, the real plan of the serpent was to undermine Adam, God's masterpiece; but he realised that he could not do this so easily, presumably because he believed that Adam was the stronger of the pair. So assuming that Adam would not easily succumb to his wiles, the serpent instead, decided to proposition Adam's *helpmate* – Eve.

Now, because Adam presumably loved Eve, he was prepared to defy God, for the chance of himself and his Lady Eve becoming gods, and attaining knowledge. The serpent promised him these irresistible possibilities: ‘For God doth know’ says the serpent ‘that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil’. (Gen. 3:5). The point here is that it is not by accident that Eckhart uses the word ‘wooded’. This has an element of seduction, temptation, and sexual fantasy; and, accompanying the word also are other feelings associated with sexual desire, illicit or otherwise, such as guilt, emotional conflict, betrayal, envy, jealousy, rivalry and competition for reproductive rights, ownership and control.

Such real mental, spiritual angst that could be associated with the first Edenic pair serves as a universal model for seduction and temptation involving a triangularity of actors: Adam, Eve and God; and if God were not actively involved in this triangular affair – He was at least one of the affected or offended-against parties – then the serpent himself would be the third party.

#### **4.3 Brown, Birth and Breasts**

Eckhart’s theological language is through and through saturated with erotic imageries and sexually-loaded words and phrases. For instance, just in this one sermon alone, *On The Nobleman*, there are constant sexual motifs such as ‘seed’ (samen), ‘seed sown’; ‘seed within us’, ‘mother’s lap’, ‘milk’, ‘love’, ‘birth’, ‘bare’, ‘naked’, ‘shapely and beautiful’, ‘virgins’, ‘chaste virgins’, ‘God naked’, ‘stripped’, ‘flower and kernel of bliss’, and so forth. Eroticism is further conveyed to us in his reference to the ‘Bride’ in the *Song*. Eckhart quoting from that love poem says: ‘Do not consider, says the Book of Love, ‘that I am brown, for I am shapely and beautiful, only the sun has discoloured me a little’ (*Song* 1:5).<sup>314</sup>

The use of the above imagery, dealing with bodily contours – shape and looks – is very striking and palpable. Now, the actual Latin from the Vulgate says: ‘Do not consider me that I am brown, because the sun hath altered my colour ....’ [*nolite me considerare quod fusca sim quia decoloravit me sol...*] (*Song* 1:5). In the original text

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<sup>314</sup> DW V *Von dem edeln menschen*: ‘Niht enahtet’, meint daz buoch der minne, ‘daz ich brûn bin, ich bin doch schrene und wol gestalt; aber diu sunne hat mich entverwet’. Josef Quint (1963), 114/11-12. See M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 110.

there is no mention of 'shapely and beautiful' as Eckhart has it. The Vulgate says: 'I am black but beautiful (*Song* 1:4) and, 'Do not consider me that I am brown, because the sun hath altered my colour (*Song* 1:5).

However, Eckhart's version of the verses is: 'Do not consider says the Book of Love, "that I am brown, for I am shapely and beautiful, only the sun has discoloured me a little"'. What Eckhart does here is to combine parts of verse 4 and verse 5, and to substitute 'brown' for 'black' and to add the word 'shapely'. Such changes are perfectly permissible and admissible on the part of Eckhart so as to make his point, for he is a theologian who elastically interprets Scriptures, getting beyond the literal to the figural meanings of a text. In this case, to show the seductive and even voluptuous and sexually appealing nature of the female lover of the *Songs*.

Now firstly, let us look at the underlying assumptions behind Eckhart's use of the phrase, 'Do not consider, says the Book of Love, "that I am brown, for I am shapely and beautiful, only the sun has discoloured me a little"'. One of these assumptions is that he is not concerned with the literal meaning of the terms black, brown, white, polka-dot or whatever. Another assumption is that his inner man or noble man, because it is sometimes compared to the Bride in *Song*, that the brownness or blackness of the Bride or the Soul only means that the inner man's light is obscured and obfuscated by the glaring or blinding images of the world.

The 'I'm black but beautiful' and 'I am brown [but] shapely and beautiful' phrases chanted by the Bride are not protests against the apparent prejudice shown towards her by the 'daughters of Jerusalem'. Where Eckhart stands, these statements by the Bride are not occasioned by ethnic or racial slurs, but they represent a theological declaration that the Bride makes. Which is this? That the sun, in this case, the intensely penetrating glares or influences of the world have burnt or discoloured the Bride of the Beloved. Remove this discolourant, and the image of the soul will gleam and shine again. Likewise, the discoloration of the Bride is a cry from the soul which says, that there are blemishes here; blemishes that shade or hide the light of the Divine Image in the soul.

Not only was the Bride of the Canticles beautiful and physically attractive, but to boot she was shapely according to Eckhart. Her physical contours were such that no

doubt they incited the passions, not only of males, but also, of females; but, this last group seemed to have envied her, not only for the beauty of her form or shape, but more for the beauty of her brown *beautiness*.

It is evident that this same shapely and beautiful lover is the one that the 'Bridegroom' again and again swoons over, and describes her breasts in superlative terms. The bridegroom is so obsessed with her breasts that he longs to caress them and lactate from them. Breast or breasts is mentioned 13 times in *Song* (1:1; 1:3; 1:12; 4:5; 4:10 (x2); 7:3; 7:7; 7:8; 7:12; 8:1; 8:8; 8:10).

So it is not surprising therefore, that on one hand Eckhart should make reference to the Bride of *Song* and her alluring charm, plus *Lady Eve's* enticement by the serpent, and the sexual undertones or overtones implied in these stories, together with the power and force of the femininity and sexuality of these two women: likewise, on the other hand, for Eckhart to spiritualise these sexual motifs and to apply them to the nobleman or the soul and his relation to God. Thus Eckhart allegorisation and spiritualisation of these erotic images show that on one hand, he was very human with passions and desires like anyone else; but, on the other hand, he had to make *transcendent* these passions and direct them towards higher goals and ideals – that is, to an erotic coupling with the Divine.

The richness of Eckhart's sexual imageries is again displayed by further references to the *Nobleman*. There seems to be an assumption or expectation, even an article of faith, that *eros* and *agape* are diametrically opposed to each other; that the former is inferior, substandard, corrupt, profane, fleshy, and that it hinders the soul's spiritual progress. In contrast, however, that *agape* is the *summum bonum* of all love.

That is, it is sacred, divine, holy, and thus it is the only type of love that is approved and sanctioned by God. It is tempting therefore then to think that this is the only type of love that Eckhart is talking about or should be concerned about. However, that is not the case, for Eckhart's love is not one or the other. For him, *eros* and *agape* are not mutually exclusive. They are not dualistic, they are not antagonistic; they are not conflicted; but they are intertwined with or superimposed upon each other. So when in an almost adolescent fashion, he presumably describes his own birth, he characterises it this way:

Many years ago I did not exist. Not long after that, my father and mother ate meat and bread and vegetables that grew in the garden, and from that I became a man. In this my father and mother were unable to help, but God made my body unaided, and created my soul after the highest. Thus I became possessed of life (*possedi me*).<sup>315</sup>

Likewise when he says:

Let no one be afraid of my saying that God loves nothing but Himself... He intends thereby to lure us into Himself and to get us purged so that He can take us into Himself so that with Himself He may love us in Him and Himself in us. And He wants our bliss so badly that he entices us into Himself with every means at His disposal, whether pleasant or disagreeable. God forbid that God should ever do anything to us that was not meant to entice us into Him. I will never give thanks to God for loving me, because He cannot help it, whether He would or not: His nature compels Him to it.<sup>316</sup>

In the first of the two quotes immediately above, on one hand, the expression ‘my father and mother ate meat and bread and vegetables that grew in the garden, and from that I became a man’ is a colourful euphemism for sexual intercourse. On the other hand, the phrase, ‘but God made my body unaided, and created my soul after the highest’ is his recognition of the power of nature or the manifestation of divine love. Also in the next quote, expressions like: ‘God loves nothing but Himself’; ‘He intends thereby to lure us’; ‘to get us purged’; ‘He wants our bliss so badly that he entices us’; ‘with every means at His disposal’; ‘He cannot help it’; ‘His nature compels Him’.

Such graphic expressions and preoccupations with sexual imageries if expressed in these ways, nowadays by anyone, most of all by a ‘preacher’, such a person would be viewed with great suspicion, and would be singled out as one in need of urgent sexual or psychological counselling. Such a person would be deemed to be a fantasist; as having an excessive-compulsive sexual disorder or even afflicted by sexual predatory

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<sup>315</sup> DW II Pr. 51 *Hec dicit dominus: honora patrem tuum* (*These things saith the Lord: Honour thy father*). [Modern German transl. ] ‘Vor vielen Jahren, da war ich noch nicht; nicht lange danach, da aßen mein Vater und meine Mutter Fleisch und Brot und Kraut, das im Garten wuchs, und davon ward ich ein Mensch. Dabei konnten mein Vater und meine Mutter nicht mitwirken, sondern Gott machte meinen Leib unmittelbar und schuf meine Seele nach dem Allerhöchsten. Da kam ich in den Besitz meines Lebens’. Josef Quint (1971), 725/474. See M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 252-253.

<sup>316</sup> DW III Pr. 73: *Dilectus deo et hominibus* [Modern German transl.] ‘Er will uns damit in sich selbst locken, daß wir geläutert werden, damit er uns in sich versetze, auf daß er uns in sich und sich in uns mit sich selber lieben könne. Und unsere Seligkeit tut ihm so not, daß er uns in sich lockt mit allem dem, womit er uns in sich zu bringen vermag, sei’s Gemach oder Ungemach. Trutz Gott, daß er je etwas über uns verhänge, womit er uns nicht in sich locke! Ich will Gott niemals dafür danken, daß er mich liebt, denn er kann’s <gar> nicht lassen, ob er wolle oder nicht, seine Natur zwingt ihn dazu’. Josef Quint (1976), 553/268-69. See transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 196-197.



tendencies. But an exception must be made for Eckhart, for his sexual imageries are of such artistry that they are *profanely* divine.

In his theological schema, it is those persons who have not yet arrived at the detached stage that have a problem – images or attachments – with sexuality, and that the problem is not God's. Because God, in Eckhart's view no doubt, is the pre-eminent sex aficionado, romanticist, lover, and seeker after pleasures both amorous and spiritual. Eckhart's theology of sex, so to speak, is rational; it is theologically and mystically unique; it is exciting, lyrical, and artistically meritorious.

This then is the parable of the *Nobleman*: his going out means that a man must go out from all forms, and from himself. He has to become wholly foreign and remote from them all. He has to become detached in order to (a) receive the Son (b) to become the Son in God's bosom and heart. The nobleman going out represents the soul's friendship or love with the One. It is a love between the lover and the virgin. This love takes the form of desire, longing, pleasure, and a wish for fulfillment, fruition, consummation, and fertility or fruitfulness.

The Nobleman going out, winning a kingdom and returning is a Caesar-like *veni, vidi, vici* triumphal acclamation. The acclamation is the ecstatic call of the ascetic or bare soul as it is locked in intimate embrace with God. It is the soul and God engaged in divine coitus, when they are no longer two, but One. From this fusion, flows the Incarnation where fruits, good fruits, plentiful fruits – sons and daughters – are produced from the love between the soul and God. Such an erotic encounter under the guise of agape shows the power, passion, intensity and urgency enshrined in Eckhart's sexual vocabulary or imageries.

#### **4.4 Mary and Martha iconic symbols of sexual detachment**

The sexuality of detachment is perhaps best illustrated by Eckhart's commentary on Martha and Mary.<sup>317</sup> Eckhart's reading of the Lucan account produces this account: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ went up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife' (Luke 10:38).

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<sup>317</sup> DW I *Pr.2*, [Mod. Gr. transl.] Quint, 434ff.

Now it must be added right away that Luke does not use the words ‘virgin’ and ‘wife’ for Martha. Eckhart no doubt using the Latin Vulgate Bible would have read this verse as: ‘...he entered into a certain town<sup>318</sup>: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house (... *irent et ipse intravit in quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam Martha nomine excepit illum in domum suam* ...).’ There is no mention here about virgin and wife. But as is usual, or unusual, Eckhart seeking to stress the necessity of his central message, creatively re-crafted the narrative to press home his point of ‘letting go’, ‘stripping off’; in sum, detachment.

Manifested immediately in his choice of words are some vivid sexual imageries: ‘virgin’, and ‘wife’. The question now is why did he find it necessary to employ those terms to talk about detachment? Well, firstly let us see what he understands by ‘virgin’ and then ‘wife’, and see how these expressions factor into his concept of detachment. ‘To be a virgin’ says Vincent ‘has nothing to do with a state of untouchability, cleanliness, asceticism or abstinence. Eckhart can speak of a virgin, even if she is a wife or ... only if she is a wife, but a wife who is detached and “constantly ready to fulfil” the will of God’.<sup>319</sup>

So a virgin for Eckhart has nothing do with or without sexual contact or sexual appetite. It is a figure of speech which symbolises spiritual qualities and inward purity. The use of the term, virgin is also revealing, for it has a dual meaning. The Latin word ‘mulier’ could mean both a virgin and wife; that is a sexually mature woman, and not a pubescent or maidenly girl. Likewise the duality of the word ‘virgin’ is demonstrated by ‘the German word, “empfangen” which can mean “to conceive” and “to receive”’.<sup>320</sup>

Eckhart plays on this word ‘virgin’ with its dual connotation, and thereby implies that Martha is a virgin because she ‘receives’ and ‘conceives’ spiritually the Lord in her *fortified* house. She receives and conceives Jesus into her *castle*, not literally or bodily, but spiritually, and in the process, simulates not only the Incarnation, but birth the Son in her soul. This simultaneous act of *receiving* and *conceiving* is spiritually, yet ironically equating Martha with the Virgin Mary.

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<sup>318</sup> The English term ‘certain town’ does not do justice to *castellum* meaning a fortress, or a stronghold or fortified place. So the virgin soul is also such a place – a bulwark.

<sup>319</sup> M. Vincent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 194.

<sup>320</sup> Op. cit.

Traditionally it was her sister Mary who was given the greater veneration, because unlike Martha, she sat in sublime attentiveness and contemplativeness at the feet of Jesus, while Martha was preoccupied with mundane and earthly things, but Eckhart now turns up-side-down this conventional characterisation of both women and now gives Martha the more excellent role. We will subsequently deal with this last point in more details.

For Eckhart, Martha's virginity and wifely role was shorthand for detachment. What is the connection then between, on one hand, a virgin and wife, and, on the other hand, detachment? First, we will talk about being a virgin, then a wife, and later how these roles affect detachment. According to Eckhart, "'Virgin' is as much as to say a person who is devoid of alien images, as empty as he was when he did not exist".<sup>321</sup> As we proceed, we will notice that the pronoun 'he' is now used to describe virgin. So this shatters the expectation that a virgin has only to be a woman; but the pronoun *he* now suggests otherwise; that is, a man is also a virgin as long as he receives and conceives Christ in his soul.

Now, the pre-eminent qualification or test for a virgin, either male or female – and in fact, the meaning of virginity for Eckhart is *imagelessness* or *emptiness* – is that a virgin is detached. This is to be: 'Devoid of alien images, as empty as he was when he did not exist' informs the Meister. What does *devoid* mean? The answer is: get rid of your old habits, and become a new man, a spiritual man – the nobleman. Eckhart concedes that it is nigh impossible for one to be *tabula rasa*; for, having reached 'the age of rational understanding' one cannot be 'empty of all images', and one 'knows many things'. But despite the post-innocence experience of man, he can still become a virgin, if he according to the Meister is, 'untrammelled by any images, just as [he] was when [he] was not'.

So here Eckhart means that although we have knowledge and images of all sorts – worldly and other-worldly – such knowledge and images do not inhere or stick to us. This declaration is equivalent to his wine in the barrel analogy, where the wine is in the

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<sup>321</sup> DW I Pr.2: 'Junevrouwe ist alsô vil gesprochen als ein mensche, der von allen vremen bilden ledic ist, alsô ledic, als er was, dô er niht enwas'. Josef Quint (1958), 25/25. See transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 71.

barrel, but the barrel or the wood is not the wine. That is, although the soul is in the world, it is not of the world. This is non-attachment or detachment. This is virginity.

This type of subject-object relation, or where, if A then B; this casual relation reminds one of the Plotinian language of ascent to the Divine, by way of 'Disengagement'. Plotinus says, 'Disengagement means simply that the soul withdraws to its own place', and he further adds:

It will hold itself above all passions and affections. Necessary pleasures and all the activity of the senses it will employ only for medicament and assuagement lest its work be impeded. Pain it may combat, but, failing the cure, it will bear meekly and ease it by refusing assent to it ...What desire there may be can never be for the vile; even the food and drink necessary for restoration will lie outside of the Soul's attention, and not less the sexual appetite: or if such desire there must be, it will turn upon the actual needs of the nature and be entirely under control ...<sup>322</sup>

Virginity is then detachment which means that:

A man who is established thus in God's will, [that person] wants nothing but what is God's will and what is God. If he were sick he would not want to be well. To him all pain is pleasure, all multiplicity is bare simplicity, if he is truly established in the will of God.<sup>323</sup>

Just as in Plotinus' account of disengagement where the soul is calm and nothing perturbs it, this same kind of firm positive assent and quietude is displayed in Eckhart's writings as when he says, for instance: 'Love God in all things equally. Love God as much as in poverty as in riches, love Him as much in sickness as in health ...love Him as much in suffering as without suffering...' <sup>324</sup>

The virgin status also applies to the Son for 'Jesus is empty and free and virginal in himself',<sup>325</sup> and because of this, he and the virgin soul can have union because they are alike says the Meister.<sup>326</sup> Jesus is virginal because he too has stripped himself of even his divinity when he in his humility assumed humanity, and as a result of his 'stripping' he receives and conceives in the soul. In a reciprocal manner, the soul

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<sup>322</sup> First Ennead 1.2.5 *On Virtue*, transl. McKenna & Page, p.8.

<sup>323</sup> DW I *Pr.* 12, Josef Quint (1958), [para 3] 478. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 87.

<sup>324</sup> DW II *Pr.* 30, Josef Quint (1971) 658/105-106. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 151.

<sup>325</sup> DW I *Pr.* 2, Josef Quint, (1958) [para 3] 434. See transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 72.

<sup>326</sup> Op. cit.

receives, and conceives the Son, and by this mutual erotica-spiritual engagement, union takes place.

Eckhart further points out that although it is necessary and creditable to be a virgin, this alone is not sufficient. That it is just as important, or even more desirable, for the soul to be a wife. That was why he cast Martha in the role of wife. Why is being a wife then even more commendable than just being a virgin? Or more precisely, why must these two mutually reinforcing and complementary spiritual qualifications – for that is what they are – exist simultaneously? The *Maestro* answers the question thus:

Now attend, and follow me closely. If a man were ever to be ever virginal, he would bear no fruit. If he is to be fruitful, he must needs be a wife. “Wife” is the noblest title one can bestow on the soul – far nobler than “virgin”.<sup>327</sup>

‘Wife’ suggests several things including, domesticity, marriage, spouseship, sexual relation from which children come, motherhood, and so forth. The wife is held in greater esteem than the virgin in Eckhart’s metaphors. Now, this is a radical departure from those long-held teachings of the Church to which he belongs: that Church which venerates and celebrates celibacy, chastity, and virginity. Eckhart sets about to turn the prevailing moral teaching and hierarchical order of the Catholic Church upside-down.

This reinterpretation – although theological and metaphorical – of long cherished and *sanctified* ecclesiastical views about the body; its ownership and control; its sexual and other ascetical practises, was bound to make the guardians of sexual morality, if not downright hostile towards Eckhart, well, certainly uncomfortable with him. Because with Eckhart elevating wifeliness over virginity, he seemed to be challenging those Pauline recommendations, commendations, and precedents on which many of the Church’s pronouncements about sexual morality were based.

Paul recommended that Christians be like him, but if they did not have that special gift of abstinence, then they could marry. This was to avoid succumbing to the overpowering and overriding temptation of lust or *burning* as he calls it. The need then to avoid burning, which if not neutralised by the convenience or inconvenience of marriage would see lust degenerating into πορνεία (fornication). He says:

For I would that all men were even as myself.... But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they so continue, even as I. But if they do

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<sup>327</sup> DW I Pr. 2, Josef Quint (1958), [para. 4], 434. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 72.

not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn. (1 Cor.7:7-9)

Now, it is not that Eckhart is advocating that everyone, if they wished, should go out and get married – for clearly not; he was a monk, and was in charge of many people who had taken the vows of chastity and other ascetic privations – he was using those everyday sexual, spousal, and familial relationships to show their relevance and applicability to the spiritual sphere.

So by juxtaposing virgin with wife, and showing the esteemed status of the later – because if virginity were to become the organising principle for the family structure, humanity would soon vanish – he was implying that sexual and marital relations/relationships, and the procreative acts that attended these associations are necessary and desirable, not only to grow, on one hand, the human kingdom, and to produce off-springs for God's kingdom; but, on the other hand, and this was most important; that sexual relations in a spiritualised sense, were key to his teachings: that is God and the soul united in fecundity, produce divine births.

Eckhart is reiterating the importance of virginity, which is God being received in the soul, and that although virginity is good, being a wife is better; for by becoming a wife – implying motherhood and childbearing – this would show thankfulness for receiving God in the soul. And as proof of one's thankfulness or gratitude, one should bear fruits, which as Eckhart says, is, 'bearing Jesus again in God's paternal heart'.<sup>328</sup> That is, just as God rewarded the virgin by his penetration, so the virgin-wife now reciprocates this love by conceiving and birthing a son in the divine image, for Divinity's pleasure, joy and continued existence.

Eckhart's exhortation to wifeliness, fertility and fruitfulness has no time for barrenness, chastity, celibacy, and sterility; for, if the Son is to be born in the soul, and soul born back *in-to* God, virginity has to be transformed into fertility. So then it was not the natural sexual urges that are to be deemed detrimental to spiritual progress – they are not the Augustinian and Thomist untamed, unruly and ungovernable wild bungle of instincts, impulses of *concupiscentia* – but, they are natural life-affirming

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<sup>328</sup> DW I Pr. 2, Josef Quint (1958) [para 4], 434. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 72.

forces, that can be harnessed in the service of the soul in her attempt to attain loving union with the divine.

This love is idealised, and is not subject to the vicissitudes or vagaries of human passions, jealousies and tantrums of unrequited love; but, this love is lasting, peaceful, and divine. This love is fruitful-fruitfulness. It is without images and encumbrances, and therefore this love is foundational to detachment. The *citadel* that Jesus went into and where he was received by a virgin and wife was the detached fortress or bulwark of the soul. In this fortification there was no shortage of anything, for there was an abundance of virgin/wives – virile and fertile inhabitants – who bore many good fruits (virtues), and found loving union with the One.

Eckhart does not end here, for although the virgin has to be a wife – a married person – it is even not enough to be ‘wedded’ as he terms it. For some: ‘Married folks bring forth little more than one fruit in a year’. That is, they are barely productive beyond the natural cycle? They bring forth the minimum of output for the maximum of effort. They only produce ‘one fruit a year’ despite all their massive spiritual exertions. What are these exertions? ‘Prayers fasting, vigils and all kinds of outwards discipline and mortification’. Eckhart calls these exertions, attachments. So again, Eckhart goes against the grain, and say that much of these pietistic practices are wasteful and unnecessary.

This assertion is startling: that the results of prayers, and so forth can be ‘paltry’ in terms of fertility. How could this be? Well, as Vicar of Thuringia in one of his topics: ‘Of True Obedience’ (*Vom wahren Gehorsam*), Brother Eckhart, as the Prior of Erfurt instructs those in his care, thus: ‘...there should be no “I want this or that to happen”, or “I want this or that thing” but only a pure going out of what is our own’.<sup>329</sup>

So that is why prayers and all those other ascetic practises are minimally effective, for is our self-will that is being paraded before God as models of saintliness. This will not do for Eckhart, because for him: ‘The most powerful form of prayer, and the one which can virtually gain all things and which is the worthiest work of all, is that which flows from a free mind...’.<sup>330</sup> A free mind, he tells is: ‘...one which is untroubled

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<sup>329</sup> DW V/1, *Reden Der Unterweisung* (Talk of Instruction), Josef Quint (1963), 505-06. See also Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings* (1994), 4-5.

<sup>330</sup> Op. cit.

and unfettered by anything ...which does not seek its own interest ...but is always immersed in God's most precious will, having gone out of what is its own'.<sup>331</sup>

So again, Eckhart 'hammers' home the theme of detachment and reminds us of the central importance of being a virgin and wife. For such a soul he restates '... is free and unfettered by attachments; [that] she is always as near to God as to herself'.<sup>332</sup> This is an interesting point about a virgin being 'free and unfettered by attachments'; for, both Paul and Eckhart agree with this statement, but ironically their interpretation or application of it, are vastly different.

Here is what St. Paul says: 'And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord: that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world: how she may please her husband' (I Cor. 7:34). Paul means that the virgin and the unmarried, who have no sexual attachments, serve the Lord better than the married person: so the implication is that married life is an impediment to the perfect Christian life.

However, Eckhart reverses the importance of these roles, and unlike Paul who implies that a married woman is somehow less holy, or even 'unholy' (in relation to the virgin who is holy in body and spirit); because she (the married woman) 'thinketh on the things of the world: how she may please her husband'; Eckhart accords centrality of place to the married woman, for, she is productive, unlike the virgin who merely receives, but does not conceive. So there is a fundamental difference here between how Paul and Eckhart view *attachments*. For Paul, virgins have no *attachments* simply because of their physical *untouchability*, but married women have *attachments*. These attachments are spousal and sexual. So the sexually unattached (i.e., virgins and the unmarried) serve the Lord better than the Christian married person according to Paul.

For Eckhart, virgins have no physical *attachments* of course, but these attachments are not necessarily sexual or spousal. But even if they do not have these *attachments* (sexual and spousal), they still might not necessarily serve the Lord any better than people who are 'attached' *maritally*. In fact, virgins in the physical sense may serve the Lord less well, because although they are virgins, they are not *wives* (this

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<sup>331</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>332</sup> DW I Pr. 2, Josef Quint (1958) [para 3], 435. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 73.



implies marriage and sexual productivity) in both the spiritual and the physical senses; and, so as virgins, they are not productive.

In fact virginity, in the human sense can be an attachment; for, one can use this as a status symbol to try and *curry favour* with God or the Church hierarchy. If this is done, this is self-will, or images, and so it is an attachment for Eckhart. The virgin is only a virgin, if he or she is spiritually detached, and not a virgin by the mere fact, that he or she as a mature adult abstain from sexual contacts. Virginity in the sexual sense is therefore not a marker of human perfection before God.

The virginity that God holds dear, Eckhart would no doubt say, is the virginity or purity of the soul. This then is detachment which does not entail sexual detachment or physical abstention for sexual contacts, but *spiritual* detachment from images and union with God. This Eckhart says is receiving the Son by insemination of the divine seed in the *citadel*, or the fortified soul; this happened to Martha, who was both virgin and wife when she received and conceived Jesus in her *citadel* or body.

So whereas for Paul, the virgin and the unmarried person are ‘detached’ for they have no sexual and marital attachments, for Eckhart it is the other way round. The married person (wife or husband) is detached for they do not glory in any physical state of virginity – in fact, they have no regards for any such state, either outward or inward; and, they are only content to go along with God’s plan for them whatever it is. They are like a boat on the ocean drifting in the current of God’s will and love. They know that if they just effortlessly drift along in God, they will arrive at a safe harbour soon enough, despite how tumultuous the waves are.

In the final analysis, one might say in conclusion, that for Eckhart: ‘Virginity is good, but being a wife is better’, but what is best, is the combination of the two – the virgin and the wife. Now, both roles are combined in Martha, and she is both herself and Mary. The two functions – virginity and wifeliness – come together as one in Martha. This combining of roles means the convergence of contemplation and action; it is the fusion of reception and conception; it is virginity (i.e., humility, detachment); and wifeliness (i.e., motherhood, fertility) melding together to allow, and to accommodate the insemination of the divine seed in the soul, so that this womb – this ground of God –

can bear fruits: that is, the birthing and re-birthing of the Son in the Soul constantly, according to Eckhart.

#### 4.5 Mary and Martha (deeper insights)

In Eckhart's second exposition of the story of Mary and Martha, he reveals some further and even deeper insights into those two characters. In terms of literary and character analyses, Mary is somewhat the static character, whereas Martha is the dynamic and evolving character. However, under Eckhart's treatment both characters are of equal importance for they complement each other.

In this second homily about Martha and Mary, Eckhart lays down some profound practical and theological truths about the journey towards spiritual perfection; and along this journey, several sexual imageries become apparent and instructive. As we revisit his account of Mary and Martha, we will observe that although some of his metaphors and language differ from those of his first enunciation of the story, that the same theme, detachment, is central to both sermons. But for our purpose, it is the sexuality of detachment that will be highlighted.

Eckhart again quoting the same scripture, Luke 10:38 as he did in his previous homily; this time he says, '... that our Lord Jesus Christ went into a little town, where he was received by a woman named Martha, and she has a sister named Mary who sat at the feet of our Lord, and listened to his words, but Martha moved about, waiting on our Lord'.<sup>333</sup>

Here he précis almost three verses of the Scriptures (Luke 10:38-40, Latin Vulgate Bible) to demonstrate concepts like receptivity, fruitfulness, and ultimately, detachment.

Now, there are three immediate and striking differences between both his stories:

1. His first account tells us that the Lord was received by a 'virgin who was a wife'. However, in that initial story no mention is made of who this person was. What he tells us, is about the sexual and spousal status of that person – *a virgin and wife*. It seems that

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<sup>333</sup> DW III Pr. 86, Josef Quint (1976), [para.1], 592. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 79.

the first telling of the story has no relation to the second story except that the basis for both accounts come from the same text, Luke 10:38.

We can only surmise here that Eckhart was not concerned with physical persons. Here already, he is implying detachment from corporeal images; and to direct the reader to the point of view in which he was most interested; that was the illustration of some rational and spiritual truths. But whether he intentionally or unintentionally meant it or not, he enunciated these spiritual truths by employing elevated sexual imageries. So, his first telling of the story makes no mention at all about Mary or Martha. It is us who by association implant the personages of Mary and Martha into Eckhart's first homily. This is perhaps understandable, because we instinctively assume that Mary is the virgin, and that Martha is the wife. But Eckhart, it seemed, had no intention to paint such a literal picture of the story. It was always for him a moral (tropological) and anagogical (spiritual) story. However, one could be forgiven for thinking that Mary is indeed the virgin, and that she bears certain resemblances to the Virgin Mary, while Martha is the wife, because she is fruitful or bears seed.

We may also think that Martha symbolises the other side of her sister Mary, who although a *spiritual* virgin, in that she *receives* the Lord, paradoxically, she bears seed: the birth of the Son in the soul. She, just like the natural birth mother of Jesus whom Christian theology says was a virgin and who produced a child – a God-man; this Mary also produces seed, but only by a surrogate – through her sister Martha.

Clearly, Eckhart's metaphorisation and embellishment of the Lucan account of Jesus entering the town, and being entertained by Martha in her house is layered with many different meanings as far as we can deduce. So Eckhart's first telling of the story of 'Martha and Mary' shows that virginity is not incompatible, not irreconcilable, nor is it incongruous with fruitfulness, and that both qualifications are necessary for the attainment of detachment.

In addition, in his first account, Eckhart calls the place where the Lord went, a 'citadel', *castellum*; whereas in his second rendering, he refers to it as 'a little town'. Here again there is a difference from the former text, for the text does not give the town a name, except to call it by the unspecified appellation 'certain', *quoddam*; nor does the

previous text give any biographical details or any titular status to the person except to use the indeterminate term, ‘certain’ *quaedam* for a woman named Martha.

Now as to why the differences in some details between one homily and the other homily with words like *citadel*, *little town*, and the dropping of the qualifying phrase *certain*, these differences may not be of much linguistic importance; that at the surface level, such changes or apparent omissions do not change the meaning of the narrative.

However, in Eckhart’s scheme of things, there seems to be a reason for everything; so, those linguistic changes, although they do not fundamentally change the basic facts of the story, any such change in syntax, word order, and the likes, may have theological significance for him. For instance, why he would now use ‘little town’ in his second account of Martha and Mary whereas before he used *citadel*, might well be intended to show that the town where Martha lived was not *that* important, hence the expression ‘little town’. But now the use of her name, Martha which was left out before, but now used, shows that she is more important than that unspecified *little town*. That she is more important than that non-descript town because her life of action becomes the road map towards the spiritual summit.

Furthermore, in this second recitation of the story of Martha and Mary, Eckhart unlike what he does in his first account, now personalises the story, not only by introducing Martha, and presenting her sister, but he immediately contrasts them to each other. The opening statements of Eckhart’s second homily of Martha and Mary all convey a sense of urgency and activity as evidenced by the words ‘received’, ‘sat’, ‘listened’, and ‘moved about’.

The previous story was more contemplative and philosophical; this second one in line with Eckhart’s thinking tries to construct a theology of engagement, involvement and practicality. Its mood is active in contrast to the passive mood of the previous homily. The story here at face value appears not to have any, or few sexual imageries, but a dig below the surface will show otherwise. Take for instance the reasons that Eckhart gives for Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord, and also the three reasons that he gave for Martha moving around and waiting on the Lord; below is a comparison of their activities:

<b>Mary</b>	<b>Martha</b>
1. Goodness of God possessed her soul	1. Mature age; ground of her being fully trained
2. Unspeakable longing	2. Wise understanding; doing outward works perfectly through love
3. Sweet solace and joy	3. Great dignity of her beloved guest

In the case of Mary it seemed that her love for the Lord was oscillating between *eros* and *caritas*. She seemed to love God conditionally. She loved God because of what she could get from God. She loved God not without a ‘why’ but for an ‘if’. ‘If He loves me, or if He blesses me then I will love Him back in return’. Or ‘I love God ‘if’ I get good things from him’. This type of love applies to business people according to Eckhart who says:

See, all those are business people who guard themselves from mortal sins, and would like to be good people, and do their good works to honour God: such as fastings, vigils, prayer and whatever good works there are; so that our Lord would give them something in return, or that God would in turn give them something they love. These kinds [of people] are all merchants.<sup>334</sup>

With such a *quid pro quo* love, if these good things were to stop, then most likely Mary would fall out of love with God. Mary’s love seemed more like a love of convenience. It perhaps even bordered on infatuation. Eckhart speaks to this type of conditional love elsewhere as he does in Sermon 49 (*Blessed is the womb... and the breasts ...*).<sup>335</sup>

For example, in speaking about charity, and this example might well apply to our case here, Eckhart says:

If now a man wants to give for the love of God, let him thus give away material goods purely for God’s sake, with no eye to profit or exchange or any transitory honour, and let him seek nothing for himself, but only God’s honour and glory ... And so too should he give spiritual goods... Now people who do charity with the expectation of being honoured: Such people’s gifts can more properly be called begging than giving, for in truth they give nothing.<sup>336</sup>

<sup>334</sup> DW I Pr.1, *Intravit Jesus in templum et coepit eicere vendentes et ementes* (Matt.21:12), Josef Quint, 429/25-29.

<sup>335</sup> DW II Pr. 49, Josef Quint (1971), 714-715, 430/431. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 286.

<sup>336</sup> DWII Pr. 49, Op. cit.

It is not to say that one is imputing the wrong kind of motives to Mary's love, for after all Eckhart says '...the goodness of God possessed her soul',<sup>337</sup> but, in contrast to Martha who in 'the ground of her being ...was so fully trained', Mary was still yet immature in her love. Mary's love had still to be developed for she derived satisfaction through her senses and that was how she got her 'comfort, joy and contentment' in God according to Eckhart. To which he adds a caution that, 'over-indulgence in these things does not occur in God's true friends in their inner senses'.<sup>338</sup> Love for God cannot be based merely on emotions – bodily senses – but they must be based on 'mental satisfaction [which] is of a spiritual nature' admonishes the preacher. This mental satisfaction is reached 'when the summit of the soul is not brought so low by any joys as to be drowned in pleasure, but rather rises resolutely above them'.<sup>339</sup>

Mary's love seemed self-indulgent; it was self-love, and to this extent it was limited and limiting. This type of love Eckhart refers to as being in the 'natural light'. He further adds:

Since all creatures take such delight in their natural light, that which draws them away from it, the light of grace must be stronger. For in the natural light man enjoys *himself*, but the light of grace, which is unspeakably more powerful, deprives man of self-enjoyment and draws him into itself.<sup>340</sup>

So although Mary *loved* God, her love had still to become less utilitarian and more sacrificial. Mary had an 'unspeakable longing' for the Lord, and as Eckhart says, 'she desired she knew not what, and wanted she knew not what'.<sup>341</sup>

What this suggests is that in Eckhart's account, Mary is portrayed as having a child-like fascination; but, it might have been a romantic feeling for the Lord. It was perhaps a young girl or young woman's fantasy for a dashing young man. Mary's love was similar to what Porete had observed in a naïve young girl and her fancy for a king, a story she relates through one of her characters, called Love in her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Love tells about a young maiden of a noble family who heard about this great king, Alexander who lived in a distant country.

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<sup>337</sup> DW III Pr. 86 *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum*, etc. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 79.

<sup>338</sup> DW III Pr. 86. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 80.

<sup>339</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>340</sup> DW III Pr. 75, J. Quint (1976), 560/297. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 280-281.

<sup>341</sup> DW III Pr. 86. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 79.

The maiden fell in love with this ‘prince charming’ so-to-speak, whom she had heard about, but to whom she was unable to speak or to see owing to the great distance and status that separated them. Because of these barriers, she became love-sick for the king. In order to assuage her melancholy she imagined some figure of her love, by ‘whom she was continually wounded in heart’; so, this love sick girl had an image of the king painted so that she would be as close as possible to that which she loved. ‘And so by means of this image [and] with her other habits she dreamed of the king’.<sup>342</sup>

This then also was the nature of Mary’s love: day-dreaming, make-believe, infatuation and obsession for her Lord. A love that was bound to be unrequited, but despite this prospect, she was undaunted, for she derived ‘sweet joy and solace’. This however had the effect of immobilising her and causing her to neglect doing other chores as she spent her time day-dreaming about her ‘prince-charming’. She would also brook no opposition from Martha; so, most likely, she was jealous of Martha and was happy that Martha was Jesus’ maid, and indirectly, her servant too. For whatever provisions Martha brought to Jesus, she Mary was bound to partake of them. Therefore in terms of love, Mary was still not fully detached and was bound up in images – self-love, self-gratification, self-indulgence, selfishness – and although she thought she *loved*, she was in love only with the *idea* of love, and not in love with Love itself which is God – the divine Love.

Martha on the other hand had long passed that fanciful or *puppy love* stage. Unlike Mary’s love which was physical, Martha’s love was of the *senses* and *spiritual*. Eckhart characterised her love as mature springing from the ground or essence of her being. Martha was an experienced woman in the ways of the world. No doubt she had been *a woman of the world*; but in Eckhart’s book that was not such a bad thing because he believed that there was as it were, an inverse relationship between sin and grace. That is the worse the sin, the better the grace. The deeper the sin the higher the salvation.

Of course, not in man’s books of law, morality and theology, but in the absolute forgiveness of God who apparently will forgive the most incorrigible of sins to the degree that the sinner is penitential. Not that Eckhart was preaching moral relativism, or

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<sup>342</sup> Transl. Ellen L. Babinsky, The Prologue, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, 80.

making light the effects of sin, or dismissing it; but he seemed well aware that God's grace was more than sufficient for remedying sin. But even more importantly, he had an understanding that sin was *inevitable*, even if it were not a physically evident or observable phenomenon; for even an absence of good could be construed as sin.

So Eckhart then seeming to have this intuition into the ontological and teleological nature of sin, enunciates propositions like these: 'Also, in every work, even in an evil, I repeat, in one evil both according to punishment and guilt, God's glory is revealed and shines forth in equal fashion'.<sup>343</sup> 'If a man had committed a thousand mortal sins, if such a man were rightly disposed he ought not to will that he had not committed them'.<sup>344</sup>

However, to return to Martha: She had experienced life. For Eckhart tells us that: 'She saw how Mary was possessed with a longing for her soul's satisfaction. Martha knew Mary better than Mary knew Martha, for she had lived long and well, and life gives the finest understanding'.<sup>345</sup> Martha understood by the light of experience that her sister's *crush* on Jesus was just a passing fancy and being cognisant of the reverie in which her sister was enrapt, she asked the Lord to 'tell her to help me'. Eckhart says she asked this of the Lord without malice or rancour. She asked this of Him affectionately.

Martha knew that any other love than divine love would not suffice, and so she wanted her sister to experience this love. Eckhart speaks of this love in Sermon 88<sup>346</sup> where he details three kinds of love. These are:

1. Divine goodness. This love allows God to create all creatures and he loves them all equally and naturally
2. Gracious or spiritual love and this love flows in the soul
3. Divine love

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<sup>343</sup> Article condemned by the Papal Bull of 1327.

<sup>344</sup> Op. cit. Yet Eckhart seemed to have scriptural support for his theology of sin because he would have been well aware of Isaiah and Amos's statements about sin or evil. 'I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things'. (Isaiah 45:7) 'Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it? (Amos 3.6).

<sup>345</sup> DW III *Pr.* 86, [para.5.lns.4-6], 592-593, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 80.

<sup>346</sup> DW III *Pr.* 75, 559-561.293-301, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 279-282.



It is divine love – that love which melds thinking with action that harnesses theory with practice; that links contemplation with doing – that Martha wishes Mary to have for both God and her fellow creatures.

#### **4.6 Eckhart: Mary, Martha, Rachel and Leah's Sexuality**

Eckhart is more than a theological *agent provocateur*, he also, as a theologian is a man of profound sexual insights as evinced by his adaptations to, and embellishments of Luke's narrative about Martha and Mary. But perhaps his profoundest insights about the theology of sexuality, or the sexuality of detachment is his passing reference to the Old Testament matriarchs, Leah and Rachel, and then contrasting them with Martha and Mary of the New Testament.

It is inconceivable not to believe that Eckhart did not spot the profound sexual implications of his teachings in the juxtaposition of those two Old Testament women alongside the two New Testament ones. But surely he was aware of the very profound sexual significance of the paring of these women with the other pair, and if so, why did he make only the faintest and passing allegorical references to the relationship between these women? He of course gave two fully well-aired theological and metaphorical analyses of Mary and Martha referring to them as virgin and wife, contemplative and active; and from these homilies I tried to show that they contained sexuality-loaded imageries which played into, and shaped the practise of detachment.

But Eckhart's exposition on the theme of Mary and Martha although quite extensive and profound, is treated only theologically by him, and any implied or explicit sexual references on his part are concealed; and, it was these concealed sexual references that I attempted to explore and expose. Now, with Eckhart's attempt to compare or contrast the lives of Martha and Mary to Leah and Rachel, he unknowingly to himself it seems – but this view is hard to believe – has exposed, and blown fully open the latent floodgates of sexuality that has always been at the root of much of his theology.

Here in the account of these two Old Testament women, the subject of sex or sexuality is not a genteel, sanitised, idealised and hushed-up activity, but it is a topic, a life-form that is the *sine qua non* of humanity's existence. Here in this ancient society

these women and their men folk are archetypes or universal symbols of the individual and society's struggle to define themselves and their *natura essentia* that is, as sexual beings.

In short, the culture in which these women and their men lived was a culture infused and saturated with sexual themes and motifs, and the prodigious sexual feats and appetites, deeds, misdeeds, and their behaviour driven as they were by love in all its varieties, or by lust in all its capriciousness; or impelled by what they saw as divine forces, still cannot cease to amaze us, and even shock us today.

Eckhart in contrasting these women from both divisions of the Bible, tersely says: 'Whoever would achieve perfection in this triple love [Divine goodness; Spiritual love; Divine love] must needs have four things'.<sup>347</sup> These I will paraphrase by restating them. (a) True detachment, (b) True life of Leah, that is, the active life, (c) True life of Rachel, that is, the contemplative life and, (d) An aspiring spirit.

Citing these women, particularly the Old Testament Leah and Rachel, the profundity of Eckhart's sexual imageries is heightened. Eckhart gives us pause for thought. Using these Old Testament matriarchs as a model for Mary and Martha this model is sexually highly symbolic. To begin, Leah is paired with Martha. This pair symbolises the active life. Rachel is compared to Mary and they represent the contemplative life. The 'lord' in these women's life is their husband Jacob. In drawing out the sexual imageries in this story where Leah and Rachel are foils for Martha and Mary, we will have to recall the narratives of these two Old Testament women.

It is an account that has all the makings of a spell-binding drama that exposes all facets of human nature – e.g., love, hate, deception, betrayal, reconciliation, joy, sadness, hope, despair, death, life, struggle for survival, tribal wars, family feuds. It is a dramaturgy of life, fictionalised, idealised, but still real enough to convey both the depravity, and yet the majesty of humanity divided up into individuals, families, tribes and nations. The story of Leah and Rachel is about sexual, romantic, and philial love. It is about sexually passionate and virile women and men. It is about the sexual exploits and proclivity of these women's husband, Jacob.

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<sup>347</sup> DW III Pr. 75, 559-561.293-301, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 282-283.

The story is also about people and God, and His continued interest and involvement even *interference* – sexual and otherwise – in people’s affairs; and, simultaneously, the story is about human beings’ sometimes dubious, ambiguous, yet mostly always trusting child-like relationship with God; but similarly, God’s somewhat stern paternal, overpowering, and at times loving relationship with humans, or at least His alleged special bond with an ancient Middle-Eastern tribe which possessed some unique ritualistic and sexual habits.

Here then is a truncated account of the two women, but the full story can be found in *Genesis* 29-35: There are heroines, heroes and villains of course in this plot. Leah is clearly a heroine, so is Jacob and Rachel (both these two are flawed hero/heroine), but nonetheless, they can be considered heroic. Laban the girls’ father, who is also Jacob’s uncle is perhaps a villain, but not a terribly bad one.

Rachel is very beautiful, Leah less so. The first time that Jacob sets eyes on Rachel while she is out tending her father’s flock of animals, Jacob falls for her – simply because of her beauty. Because he could not afford a dowry for marriage, he offered her father seven years of free labour as reward for Rachel’s hand. But after seven years when it was time for Jacob to be married to Rachel, her father switched her on the wedding night giving instead Leah, the less attractive daughter to Jacob.

After the wedding night, on the following day, Jacob discovered the trick that his uncle had played on him Jacob was very unhappy with the deception that Laban had perpetrated on him, and unhappier still with Leah, for he did not love her. It was Rachel that he dearly loved. But ironically, Leah made the best of the marriage and loved Jacob.

To bring Eckhart in here, we may begin to see why she would be considered by him as someone of action. She tried to work with the worst possible worlds, and make the arranged marriage work which by subterfuge was foisted on both she and Jacob. Laban in trying to mollify Jacob’s anger agreed that Jacob could afterall marry Rachel based on the condition that after he married her, he would work free for him for another seven years. So within the month he was allowed to marry Rachel. He now had two wives.

So after he married Rachel, Jacob worked for free another seven years for Laban as he had promised. Tensions between the two women, Rachel and Leah developed, and Rachel became intensely jealous of Leah, because Leah could have children and she could not have any. Yahweh had blocked Rachel's womb because Jacob loved her, but hated Leah. So God was *punishing* Rachel because Jacob did not love Leah.

However, she had a succession of sons, and Rachel not being able to have any children began to despair for her life and wished to die. To return to Eckhart, it seems that he classifies Rachel as the contemplative because she was not fruitful. That although she was a wife, she could not produce seed, so paradoxically that made her a virgin.

During all that time of Rachel's anger, and envy towards Leah, the latter seemed to have stayed unperturbed – detached – and continued having children. Again, here she is viewed as active - producing fruits and staying serene through it all, despite the envy of Rachel, and the disfavour shown to her by Jacob. Rachel finding that she could not have any children for Jacob gave her maid, Bilhah to Jacob, and she through this surrogate womb produced two sons for Jacob. Leah after her fourth child, Judah, had been born, thought that she had passed child-bearing age, and so she decided to imitate Rachel by also giving her maid Zilpah to Jacob for him to impregnate. Zilpah produced two sons also for Jacob. So at his stage Jacob has eight sons. Four from Leah and two each from his substitute wives.

Leah still wanted more children. So Rachel makes a deal with Leah to hire out Jacob to her for sex in exchange for Leah giving her some fruits or berries called 'mandrakes' which Leah's first son (Reuben) had collected that day. This swop – sex for mandrakes – saw Jacob visiting Leah again for sex. Subsequently, she had another two sons for Jacob, and finally she had a daughter, Dinah. So in the end, Leah had six sons and one daughter for Jacob. Still for all, Jacob did not love Leah but he loved Rachel.

So because Leah desperately wanted Jacob to remain with her – for she loved him – that was why by having so many children for him she thought she would gain his love. For she said: 'God hath endued me with a good dowry; now will my husband dwell with me, because I have born him six sons...' (Gen. 30:20). Here again, with

Leah nobly bearing her grief and rejection at the hands of Jacob, Eckhart characterises Leah as an ‘active’ person. She is patient, long-suffering, loving, forgiving, and working.

At long last, God takes pity on Rachel and allows her to produce Joseph. No mention here is made of Jacob having sexual intercourse with her. It seemed as if by a miracle that she had this child: that same child who later was to be a saviour (in Egypt where through his brothers’ treachery he was banished) to his people. This is how his birth is recorded: ‘And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb. And she conceived, and bares a son; and said, ‘God hath taken away my reproach: And she called his name Joseph; and said, The LORD shall add to me another son’. (Gen. 30:22-24)

Finally, Jacob left Laban, and as he and his clan and wives were in transit from Mesopotamia to Bethel in Canaan, Rachel died in childbirth giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob erected a monument in her honour. (Gen. 35:15-20) This showed the mark of affection that he had for her, in that he immortalised her memory by a permanent marker along the highway. At some point later, Leah died, but no monument was raised for her. She was just buried in the family plot. ‘In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah ... and there I buried Leah’ (Gen. 49: 30-31). So to the very end, even in death Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah.

Now, in line with Eckhart’s teachings about detachment, how do these sexual imageries and actual sexual encounters between those Old Testament tribal and religious matriarchs and patriarchs play into the need for detachment and union? How does Leah and Rachel resemble Martha and Mary? A few additional words will follow in addressing these questions.

To begin, it seems that the romantic and unromantic desires, the sexual alliances and dalliances; the polygamous relationships, the competition for sexual favours; the intense desire for procreation and property rights, and the overwhelming desire to become parents hardly seem like *detachments*.

On the contrary they appear more like *attachments*. This seems so in view of what Eckhart enunciates about detachment:

A man who is established thus in God’s will wants nothing but what is God’s will and what is God. If he were sick he would not want to be well. To him all

pain is pleasure, all multiplicity is bare simplicity, if he is truly established in the will of God...That man who is established thus in God's love must be dead to self and all created things, paying as little regard to himself as to one who is a thousand miles away.<sup>348</sup>

However, this story of detachment has another side to it. For Eckhart is not saying that one has to abandon the world, but that one has to stay engaged in it. He recognises that as long as we live in this world, that we will be affected by the world of senses. He tells us that:

Now our good people imagine they can reach a point where sensible things do not affect the senses. That cannot be ... But this much *can* be attained: that when it is observed with insight, a rational God-conformed will submits to the insight and bids the will stand back from it, and the will answers, 'I will, gladly'. Lo and behold, *then* strife changes to joy. For what a man has gained by heavy toil brings him heart's delight, and *then* it bears fruit.<sup>349</sup>

So therefore based on the above formula that detachment also means involvement and activity in the real world, where the pain, joy, love, hate and everything else of the world is present, and even cannot be avoided. However, the difference in the responses between the detached and the attached soul, is that whereas attached souls are overwhelmed by the cares of this world, the detached person being in union with God leaves these cares to God. Eckhart in his *Talks of Instruction* says:

We should grasp God in all things and should train ourselves to keep God always present in our mind, in our striving and in our love. Take note of how you are inwardly turned to God when in church or in your cell, and maintain this same attitude of mind, preserving it when you go among the crowd, into restlessness and diversity.<sup>350</sup>

On this point of detachment which could paradoxically mean *attachment* or engagement, Vinzent says:

As a result of this dialectical understanding [paradoxically, cf. Eckhart: 'The more he is in things, the more he is outside the things; the more within; the more outside; the more inside, the more within', *Pr.* 30 (DW II 94,17)], detachment does not alienate us from this world, it provides the only basis for being in this world, being free from and free within this world without losing oneself in it. It is not a prescript for retirement, but a description of a transforming engagement, without selfish agenda, not even for a higher purpose, as it is engagement

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<sup>348</sup> DW I *Pr.* 12, Josef Quint (1958), [para. 3], 478, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 87.

<sup>349</sup> DW III *Pr.* 86, 598.492, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 88.

<sup>350</sup> 'Meister Eckhart, Selected Writings', *On detachment and possessing God*, 9.

without purpose, driven by the same drivers that God is driven by: lust, love, humility and mercy.<sup>351</sup>

Therefore based on the above formulations of detachment, although Rachel and Leah were engaged in the world, through marriage, children, work, suffering, heartaches, and all the other myriad ills that attend and assail the senses; Rachel like Mary was a ‘contemplative’, in that she tried to figure out why she was barren, but waited on the Lord to make her fruitful. Leah, was Martha, that although she was the ‘Cinderella-like’ sister, neglected and shunned, she got on with life: caring, sharing, doing, pleasing her ‘lord’ Jacob, and producing children for him.

Each of the two sets of women then (Rachel and Leah; Mary and Martha) who as individuals having her own virtues, when combined with the virtues – virgin and wife, contemplation and action – of the other sister, resulted in each of Old Testament and New Testament pair being *detached*. All these women were detached by their pursuit of virtues, and by fusing together contemplation and action. These women were caught up in ‘the circle of eternity’ (*Umkreis der Ewigkeit*) according to Eckhart, and this circle is where ‘the soul has three ways into God’. These ways, Eckhart says are:<sup>352</sup>

1. Seeking God in all creatures with manifold activity and ardent longing
2. Pursuing a wayless way, free and yet bound, raised, rapt away well-nigh past self and all things, without will and without images, even though not yet in essential being
3. Being at home, that is: seeing God without means in His own being... to embrace and be embraced, to see and be seen, to hold and to be held – that is the goal, where the spirits ever at rest, united in joyous eternity!

So, these sets of women, Leah and Rachel; Martha and Mary; together with Eve, the Bride of the Songs, and even the Woman of Samaria – all of whom are metaphors for the soul’s journey to spiritual fulfillment – they all, having finally arrived at union by the melding of meditation or contemplation with an active or practical life were all able to enjoy the thrill of erotically-oriented divine love in the manner that Eckhart has

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<sup>351</sup> M. Vincent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 245.

<sup>352</sup> DW III Pr.86, 595-596.486-488, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 83-85.

already described it, when he says: ‘The soul receives a kiss from the Godhead ...’.<sup>353</sup>  
Not only does God kiss the soul, but He touches the soul. ‘With the first touch with which God touches the soul and continues touching her as uncreated and uncreatable, there through God’s touch she is as noble as God Himself. God touches the soul like Himself’.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> DW I *Pr.* 10, transl. M.O.C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 145.

<sup>354</sup> DW I *Pr.* 10 [para.1], 471 (my transl.).



## Chapter Five: Botanical and agricultural themes

We will proceed to look at some more sexual imageries of Eckhart's, but ones that are expressed by botanical and agronomical themes. Eckhart recognises and acknowledges that some people believe that 'the flower and core of knowledge resides in the knowledge of God'.<sup>355</sup> This knowledge is a rational, intellective or reflective knowledge. One that is like the Delphic dictum 'Know Thyself' or the Socratic principle of 'happiness' which is: 'to know *that* you want, *what* you want'. In the case of those persons to whom Eckhart refers, they believe that blessedness, that is to say, joy and happiness or the *unio mystica* experience with God, is attained 'when the spirit knows that it knows God'.<sup>356</sup>

Up to a certain point, Eckhart subscribes to this notion that blessedness, which is like a *flower* and its *core*, comes about by the knowledge or the perception that 'the spirit really knows that it knows God'. However, the claim that blessedness bestows knowledge is a limiting concept for Eckhart, for although such a belief is 'quite plausible' as he admits, it is not totally true, because for Eckhart, this *God-knowing* knowledge, although a *necessary* condition for blessedness, it is not a *sufficient* one for knowing God.

At the outset of his discussion about knowing, perceiving, and contemplating God, Eckhart utilises sexual imageries by resorting to the metaphor of 'flower and core'. The use of this imagery is not accidental. It is a very physical and graphic use of an image which evokes sensations of sight, feel, smell, taste, pleasure, and so forth.

However, even deeper than the surface sensory appeal of the floral imagery to those who see a relationship between this imagery and blessedness, Eckhart gets beyond the mere aesthetics of the floral imagery and into the sexual nature of the flower. The flower is an active, living, breathing life-form; and, most of them are invested with reproductive, fertile and sexual organs.

For instance, the flower has stamens (male reproductive organs) and carpels or pistils (female reproductive organs). In order for a viable seed to come about, the ovule

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<sup>355</sup> DWV *Von dem edeln menschen*: 'Nû hât gedunket etliche liute und schinet gar gelouplich, daz bluome und kerne der srelicheit lige in bekanntnisse'. Josef Quint (1963) 116/23-24. See E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 245.

<sup>356</sup> 'dâ der geist bekennet, daz er got bekennet', *ibid.* 116/25.

of the flower must be fertilised. This fertilisation is accomplished by the process of pollination carried out by animals or insects like bees as the latter dart from flower to flower harvesting nectar. Due to the activity of these creatures, pollen, the fertilising agent is deposited on the stigma, a female reproductive organ of the flower. These botanical or natural principles<sup>357</sup> must have been known to Eckhart, and in that principle, he saw the resemblance of it to the work of divine procreation which takes place in the soul; and, so blessedness or the salvific work of God becomes an agro-theological productive enterprise. Although Eckhart to some degree agrees that *blessedness is the flower and core of knowledge of God*, this metaphor is only partially true for him.

Real blessedness for him consists not in mere knowledge – not in rational, deductive, inductive, intuitive, reflective or intellective knowledge of God; but, rather this knowledge consists ‘when the soul contemplates God directly’.<sup>358</sup> By this assertion, Eckhart means that there must be no mediations, no go-betweens, no images, no multiplicities – absolutely nothing between the soul and God. The notion of *abegescheidenheit*, that is stripping-off, letting go, of nakedness, being as one were before one was born; that is, without human or worldly knowledge; this must be the hallmarks or the prerequisites for *knowing* God.

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<sup>357</sup> In *Historia plantarum* (HP) 1 and *De causis plantarum* (CP), Theophrastus (c. 371-287 B.C.) laid a wide and solid foundation for botany, including the morphology and function of the flowers, and the relationship between flowers and fruits (HP 1.13; 1.14.1-2; 3.3,4-8). The insufficient understanding, at the time, of the flower and its role did not affect Theophrastus’s ability to grasp the need for pollination/fertilization in the dioecious date-palm: he described the practice of artificial pollination of the female date tree by the inflorescence of the male and compared it to the sexual process among fish.... Xxx (author?), ‘Male and Female in Theophrastus’s Botanical Works’, *Journal of the History of Biology* 28 (1995), 317-332. See also, *Decline of Botany - the Dark Ages...* the plants reviewed by Pliny and, after works of Aristotle and Theophrastus became known, the plants reviewed by them, too, had also to exist in Central Europe. It was further assumed that the lists made in antiquity of plants and the descriptions given of them were complete. First signs of original observations go back to the abbess Hildegard von Bingen (1099-1179). She gave descriptions of more than 300 different plants and put German names on them, though she was writing, as was usual, in Latin. Some of these names have been used in the local dialect (Rhineland) up until the last century. Saint Albert the Great (1193 [?] -1280) from Laningen upon the Danube was a widely travelled clergyman and scholar. He is thought to be the rediscoverer of scientific botany. In his work, that deals only in a small section with plants is the body of thought of antiquity mirrored; still, it does represent the first descriptive work on the flora of Europe and it became both model and precursor of western literature (not only in the subject of botany). See Paul von Sengbusch, (Heide, Germany). Link: [www.biologie.uni-hamburg.de/b-online/e01/01c.htm](http://www.biologie.uni-hamburg.de/b-online/e01/01c.htm) (2003). [Accessed, October 2012].

<sup>358</sup> ‘sô diu sêle schouwet got blôz’, *ibid.* 116/29. See E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 245.

## 5.1 Real significance of floral imagery

Although the floral imagery is a compelling one, that too is an image used as an intellectual comparison, and so it must also be jettisoned if one is to *know* God. For it is easy to substitute or to mistake the *blessedness*, the virtue or the *delight* that is obtained through knowledge and intellectual endeavours of God for the source of real knowledge. Or in other words, knowledge may become an end in itself – to be enjoyed for its own sake – rather than it being a means to an end. That end is to taste, feel, experience and intuit God – to achieve the Eckhartian *sixth stage* toward union with the One. This Stage according to Eckhart is when ‘the man becomes free of all images and is transformed into the image of God’s everlastingness and has attained to a complete and perfect oblivion of this transient life in time, and has been drawn and wholly changed into a divine image, and has become God’s child’.<sup>359</sup>

For Eckhart there has to be no distinction between the real and the imaginary. No difference between form and substance, between creator and creatures, between human knowledge and the divine knowledge. Between the *just* man and *justice*. There has to be no division between *red* and *redness*, all must be one without division and fractionalisation. That is the physical object that the eye sees becomes the same as the eye or what the mind sees. So objective reality becomes the same as intellectual or intuitive reality. In Eckhartian parlance, the eye that I see God with is the same eye with which God sees me. Thus God becomes reflected in the soul and the soul equally reflects God back to Himself. This is what constitutes true knowledge for Eckhart; that is, ‘knowing God directly’.

In contrast to the intellectual use of imageries, with their physical and erotic sexual connotations, the symbolism of *flower* and *core* allows Eckhart to go beyond a comparative use of such imagery; as he elevates the concept as placeholders for the *visio beatifica* with the One. That is to say, the floral imagery becomes an expression for the love, bliss, blessedness, and joy that occur between the soul and God; of the intimacy between the bride and bridegroom.

Interesting also, there is in the use of this floral imagery, although Eckhart does not directly say it, an allusion to the Virgin Mary. She, according to Luke’s Gospel is a

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<sup>359</sup> DW V Liber ‘Benedictus’: ‘... und übergewandelt in ein götlich bilde, gotes kint worden ist’, Quint, 112/21-22. See E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 242.

virgin or a *young maiden*, metaphorically, a *young flower*; one who had not yet been *deflowered*, and one who was now *always* selected to have her womb impregnated with the divine seed. The angel Gabriel winging his way toward her, in as much as a bird might fly to the flower to pollinate a flower, announces the news that the birth of God's Son in Mary was to take place in her. She in total astonishment queried: 'How this shall be, seeing that I know not a man?' (Luke 1: 34 KJV).

This *knowing no man* declaration of Mary might suggest to Eckhart, that Mary is unencumbered with earthly cares, and although she has responsibilities, duties and so on as an engaged young woman, she shared some of the traits of both the other Mary and her sister Martha. The Virgin Mary has characteristics of virgin and wife; contemplation and action. Indeed, the Virgin Mary paradoxically is more like the Martha and less like her sister Mary as Eckhart's two sermons<sup>360</sup> *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum ...* about Mary and Martha, which having been previously discussed, have shown.

In the Annunciation, Gabriel puts Mary's mind at ease and assuage her fears because he and she realised that social reproach and ostracisation would follow, if she were found not be sexually intact due to the fact that she was not yet married to Joseph to whom she was engaged. Gabriel assured her that she was not to worry because she had been 'highly favoured and blessed among women' (Luke 1:28). He further disclosed to her that the Holy Ghost (which seems to embody both the mother and father, male and female principles, as creative agent) – would 'overshadow her and that a holy thing would be born in her called the son of God'. (1:35)

Now, the floral imagery appropriately fits the Annunciation scenario surrounding Mary. However, one cannot be sure that Eckhart actually subscribes to the historical and physical reality of such an event. But, knowing what we know of him, in that he applies a metaphorical and spiritual gloss to much of his Scriptural exegeses, the historicity of the event or the lack of it would not unduly concern him. For he, taking a Gnostic approach towards the Birth – that it is an *ahistorical* and metaphorical event – that such an account is a shorthand way of expressing the *mystery* of birthing and conceiving, and the symbolic representation of universal motherhood: that, Mary along

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<sup>360</sup> DW I Pr.2 and DW III Pr. 86, J. Quint, Kohlhammer (1958 and 1986) respectively.

with 'Frau Eva' as he often characterises the latter; that both women are the archetypal maternal representatives of the whole human family.

However, these universal matriarchs are not necessarily mere physical or historical personages, but *types*, or ontological models that are invested with spiritual and divine properties; and, that they embody both the male and female procreative or sexual principles as much as the flower does. Because Eckhart sees the birth process as cosmic in scope, this birth is now taking place *all* the time in the soul. It is not a one-off or finite event. It is a birth for the *Here-and-Now*.

This is the *Eternal Now* that transcends time, place, and space; and, this phenomenon (birth), nonetheless, contains these qualities and quantities (time, space and place). This is the *Now* that he alluded to when he said: 'Now some people have thought, and it seems quite plausible, that the flower and core of blessedness consists in knowledge ...'. This is the *Now* that he refers to in his *Genesis* Commentary which he sees as 'the first simple now of eternity; [the] very same now in which God exists from eternity, in which also the emanation of the divine Persons eternally is, was, and will be'.<sup>361</sup>

Likewise, the importance of the floral symbol and the sexual imageries associated with this symbol are demonstrated by Eckhart's exposition on Ecclesiasticus 24:23: 'Ego quasi vitis fructificavi suavitatem odoris' (I am like a fruitful vine putting out fragrant shoots).<sup>362</sup> Or 'As the vine I have brought forth a pleasant odour'.

This 'as the vine ...' declaration runs through his lecture on this verse of Ecclesiasticus, but its real theme is about *Being* or *Existence*. Here in Eckhart's exposition on *Si*. 24:23 much of his theological corpus is encapsulated. Furthermore, his theological language not only captures a metaphysical side of him, but if one may dare say so, also reveals a *mystical* side of him. This *mystical* side is evidenced by his unique analysis and tropological meanings that he manages to extract from this *Apocryphal* book. We find then that with his sermon being laced with many metaphoric and

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<sup>361</sup> LW I *Expositio libri Genesis* cap. 1 v. 1.7/20-23, "est primum nunc simplex eternitatis, ipsum inquam idem nunc penitus in quo deus est ab eterno, in quo etiam est, fuit et erit eternaliter personarum diuinarum emanatio". Josef Koch, Kohlhammer. Cf. E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 84.

<sup>362</sup> LW II *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici* cap. 24, Sermo 1.1.6, Albert Zimmermann und Loris Sturlese. Kohlhammer (1992), 251.

transcendent examples about the vine, with many of his references also coming from that very Gnostic book of John; they, all taken together, show the deep asymmetry between the soul and the divine. This deep relationship between the Lord and those who have a claim on him is shown by Eckhart's masterful use, again, of some very palpable botanical and agronomical imageries.

Eckhart's *ontology*, if I may call it that, shapes and re-shapes a greater mystery: the neo-platonic formulations of emanation outflow and return. These neo-platonic epiphenomena re-casted by Eckhart become his understanding of the *Incarnation*. In short, *being*, *essence*, *existence*, and other such fundamental ontological realities are some of the sub-themes of Eckhart's discourse on Ecclesiasticus.

However, my emphasis is not on the metaphysics *per se*, or the philosophy of Eckhart as such, but on the sexual implications of the physical or sexual imageries that he uses; and this verse that I am about to examine is rich in such sexual connotations; for interspersed in between the whole sermon and particularly in the verse in question is the physical representation of the vine as a living, fertile, and organic entity. For from the vine issues forth blossoms and fruits, and from these are derived, taste, sweetness, smell, fragrance, enjoyment, and other such pleasurable sensations that excite the palate, the nostrils, the passions, and the senses.

It is these sensory and sensual tendrils that Eckhart taps into; that he uses as psychic, and mental props or metaphors; that he uses as a vehicle to transport us to a plane beyond our immediate physical and sensory perceptions where we can make connections with our inner selves, and thereby discern the divine-human configurations within us. He allows us to go beyond those immediate sensual zones and to be transported into the regions of intellect and knowing, and also to be transferred into the affective domains of wisdom, truth, virtue, will, and love.

Ultimately all these domains – the physical, psychic, intellective, moral, and spiritual ones – seem to become almost *mystical* under the Meister's *spell*, as these domains now become a part of the divine realm. But these fertile and dynamic capacities – *potential*, *actual*, *virtual* and *formal* – in turn get recycled back into the creation tapestry; that is, these energy fields as it were, become physical, sensual, sexual and affective points of contact in a dynamic relationship between *humana et divina*.

So Eckhart's vocabulary about vine, fruits, flowers, blossoms, sweetness, aroma, fragrance – all these sweet-and-taste-laden imageries, along with abstract ones like, purity, knowledge, intellect, wisdom, truth; justice and so forth – are a kind of *mystical* or ontological lexicography for the essential nature of God, Son, and Holy Spirit. These symbols at the same time are cosmological and theological markers charting the soul's progress – that is its human powers – towards a transcendent reality beyond time and space, yet rooted in the here-and-now of Eternity.

Eckhart's exposition on Ecclesiasticus is less about Socratic logic; less about Euclidian geometric-theological propositions; it is not Thomistic proofs and dialectic arguments about God; but, his exposition on the text on Ecclesiasticus is Eckhart's invitation to all, to taste, to smell, to enjoy, and to intuit the divine within us.

## 5.2 Botanic epistemology

We will now examine Eckhart's verse in relationship to sexual imageries. 'Ego quasi vitis fructificavi suavitatem odoris' (As the vine I have brought forth a pleasant odour) (Eccli. 24:23). Eckhart's exegesis on this verse is as follows:

In what has been said, there is something doubtful: First, because, as has been said above, it is sweet to which of their own by force draws; this alone, however, accords to the first mover and the final end. It is certain, however, that the fruit is the end/aim of the flower and that of the sense of smell is taste. Again, the flower serves the fruit, not the other way around, and a flower in the fruit breathes, not the other way around. What is, therefore, which is here said, 'I brought forth a pleasant odour of', since the smell, does not elicit by force of its own, but rather through the strength of its fruit, to which it is ordered as the sense of smell to the taste of it?<sup>363</sup>

To be sure, this rendering is obscure and needs explaining. First, the word *Doubt* (*dubium*) is a little puzzling. Does he mean 'there is doubt in the verse? Or does he mean 'do you doubt?' Or does he mean without a doubt? These are questions which arise when one first approaches the text. But in the context of what has been said before, and what follows after the word *doubt*, he seems to be saying that: The statement is

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<sup>363</sup> LW II 246,17, Lectio 1. "Ego quasi vitis fructificavi suavitatem odoris". Dubium videtur in verbis praemissis: primo quia, ut dictum est supra, suave est quod sua vi trahit; hoc autem est solius primi moventis et finis ultimi. Constat autem quod fructus est finis floris et gustus olfactus. Rursus flos servit fructui, non e converso, et flos spirat in fructum, non e converso. Quid est ergo quod hic dicitur: "fructificavi suavitatem odoris", cum odor non trahat sua vi, sed potius vi ipsius fructus, ad quem ordinatur sicut olfactus ad gustum'?

*doubtful* because contrary to the conventional reading of the scriptural statement, and rather as a deeper explanation of it, it is ‘not the vine that has brought forth the pleasant odour, but rather it is the pleasant odour which has brought forth the vine’.

Contrary to expectations, the pleasant smell of the flower or the sweetness of the fruit does not depend on the flower or fruit, but it is the other way around: that is, the fruit, flower, blossom, or whatever, owes its existence to the smell, and taste of the fruit. Fruit and blossom as it were, have no independent existence – they are only *accidental* occurrences appearing as mere formal properties; smell, taste, etc. are not the *real* or *virtual* roots of essence, or of substance.

It is the original *somethingness* of smell, sight, taste, and fragrance that has the force to *draw*. It is this original smell or force that constitutes the life force of all living things. It is the fundamental principle of *enjoyment* embedded in the fruit that is its power of attraction. According to Eckhart then, the smell or taste in itself is the *first* and *final* principle of all things. It is the smell which is the *reason* for the fruit’s existence, and the smell is also its *teleo* (or end of its existence). The taste or smell exists to please, and its purpose also is, to be pleasing.

Enjoyment in the fruit is therefore its *raison d’etre*. It is like the chicken and egg question as to which comes first: chicken or egg: Which is first? Neither. Both are simultaneously occurring: the egg begets the chicken and the chicken begets the egg. But the principle of begetting either chicken or egg lies in the eternal immutable reality that ‘like can only beget like’. There is as it were, an eternal genetic blueprint that decrees that ‘if A then B, ‘B’, therefore A’. So fragrance, smell, taste, etc. determines what a fruit is *to be*. Thus, if it were just the fruit that determined smells, then it would be ‘this’ or ‘that’ smell or ‘no smell at all’, or it would be ‘*only one smell*’. But because fragrance or smell is pre-existent, it has already *determined* what fruits are to be: i.e., apple, fig, pear, and so forth.

Such a statement of Eckhart’s is an ontological understanding of the principle of begetting or origin, and it is a problem that the ancients have wrestled with. That is: What is it that *thing* which is the essence of all things? In other words, what is being before being, or being-to-be? For even though one thing is, it has its reason to become; what therefore is this driving or drawing force towards existence or *being*?



For some philosophers these were universals called *ideas* or forms (*eidos*). Others saw it as some fundamental principle like fire, water, air, and so on. Others saw the principles as atoms, numbers or spirits, and/or some other combination of elements seen or unseen. Others saw this force as *soul*, that intrinsic if abstract *somethingness* or *quiddity* that underlay all things. For Eckhart then, he is asking that same question of Being, and for him at a formal or a physical level, smell, taste, sight, etc. are what *draws* or *creates*.

But ultimately all those attractions: smells, tastes, fragrances and so on, have their origins in that ultimate and final *principle*. This principle is the same as *ratio* – *Is-ness* – which is *Unum* (*Deus est Unum*). He, it is that is true, real, and the being of all, and everything. All things, however, are merely a reflection of the One. He is the ultimate vine, the ultimate sweetness, the ultimate fragrance, and all things are just His image or reflection. Without Him things would not exist, no more than our reflection in a mirror would exist were it not for the glass. Take away the image from out of the glass, and the reflection of the image would cease to exist.

In fact, even the very glass itself – the medium of the reflection – is itself a reflection of the reflection. That is to say, the very glass itself is a reflection of the One, in which we view the image. So the reflection is itself an attribute of the divine. So when we see ourselves in the mirror, which is itself a reflection of the Divine, we see in ourselves, an attribute of the Divine. Thus the smell, fragrance, etc. is a quality of the Divine. Thus creatures, flowers, vines, etc. have no independent existence apart for their primal or original image, which is the One.

Eckhart takes these scriptural images, about vines, shoots, smells, etc. to another level, and get beyond their surface meanings; and he in a grand scheme unites anthropology with divinity in a tropological manner that lets us capture the *mystical* nature of things. But this *mysticism* is no longer mysterious, for everything resolves itself into unity, simplicity, and oneness.

The fundamental sexual imagistic lesson in all this is: all creative forces are primarily driven by human physical contacts, interactions, desires, and passions which all ultimately connect at the point of love and union between the human and the divine.

Likewise, such interactions and inter-connectedness are expressed in parables such as *Incarnation* and the *Birth of the Son in the Soul*, such that these procreative and regenerative forces that attract humanity to divinity and *vice versa* are forces that are *sui generis*. Eckhart is casting doubt on the statement, ‘As the vine I have brought forth a pleasant odour’ for the following reasons. Let me explain how. First, at a literal level, it is the sweetness or smell or sight of an object – which is its own force – i.e., that *draws* or *attracts*.

But a deeper meaning of this statement is that, it is not the mere physicality of these objects or sensations that contain the drawing power, but the real drawing power of the fruit is the quality of *sight*, *taste* and *smell*. And so without those sensory apparatus likes eye, nose, tongue, etc. all those physical realities would have no existence, for without sight, etc. there would be no *seeing*. But yet, even beyond sight there is something even more important than seeing, and this is *perception* or *discernment*, *apprehension*, *knowledge*, *intuition*, *intellect* and so forth. So right way, we begin to see that Eckhart is trying to get beyond the *apparent* to the *real*, and to show us that this ‘drawing power’ or ‘force’ is not dependent on actual raw data, but that it really depends on discernment and discrimination of the data to be able to *see*, *taste* or *smell*.

To demonstrate why there is doubt about the claim, that the fruit or blossom produces the sweet smell, when, according to Eckhart, it is the fragrance or smell that determines what the fruit is; Eckhart proceeds to give more reasons for the doubtfulness of the claim: He explains: ‘First, because, as has been said above, it is sweet to which of their own by force draws’. That is why in the next paragraph he adds: ‘Again, a slave [taste or smell] to the flower of its fruit, not the other way around, and a flower in the fruit breathes, not the other way around’.<sup>364</sup> He is saying in effect that the fruit or its smell is the end of the nostrils. That is, the nostril would not exist if it were not for fragrance or smell; nor would the tongue exist, which is a slave to taste, if sweetness did not exist. That is, the fruit’s existence depends on smell, and not the other way around,

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<sup>364</sup> LW II 246: “Ego quasi vitis fructificavi suavitatem odoris”; LW II 242,13: ‘Et hoc est tertium principale, scilicet amati suavis: “suavitatem odoris”. Suave est quod sua vi trahit, et hoc est tertia amati proprietates, quod videlicet ipsum solum et sui solius vi trahat’.

i.e., taste or smell determines the fruit. So taste breathes into fruit its sweetness, and the smell breathes into flowers its fragrance.

### 5.3 Typology

The analogy of using the graphic example of a vine is a typology which is meant to have salvific or spiritual significance, because the metaphor really refers to the Son who is ultimately the ‘principle’ and simultaneously the ‘end’ of all things. Likewise, expressions like sweetness, fruit, enjoyment, blossom, and so forth are figures of speech for the divine. Of course, for Eckhart, the beloved and the sweetness that he thinks about is obviously the amorous relationship between the Son and the soul. This view is evidenced by what Eckhart had previously said elsewhere in this sermon. That is:

And this is the third principle, that is, the sweetness of the beloved: “a pleasant odour”. Pleasant it is, it is that draws its own intrinsic power, and this is the third of the beloved property, to wit, that him alone and his own by force alone draws them.<sup>365</sup>

So what are the sexual imageries here that we may glean from Eckhart’s interpretation of Ecclesiasticus 24:23? Let us recap his thesis by paraphrasing him. Accordingly then, let us look at the fact that this same principle also is the exclusive property or arrangement that exists between the terms *see* and *discern*, and the non-distinction between *divine* and *divinity*; for that which is divine has breath or essence. Another way of saying this is that existence is God. This also is the case, that giving pleasure is the property that belongs exclusively to flowers. The same argument is true of God, who works in all, and is in all, and is Himself in all our doings; he is our master and lord. He is the beginning and the end; the first and the last. He is therefore the flower in all principles and its enjoyment and end’.<sup>366</sup>

Eckhart’s exposition of Ecclesiasticus 24:23 is rich in sensuous, procreative and life-generating imageries. The following Latin words convey this sense of eroticism: *vitis* (vine)

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<sup>365</sup> ‘Rursus flos servit fructui, non e converso, et flos spirat in fructum, non e converso. Quid est ergo quod hic dicitur: “fructificavi suavitatem odoris”, cum odor non trahat sua vi, sed potius vi ipsius fructus, ad quem ordinatur sicut olfactus ad gustum?’

<sup>366</sup> LW II 247: “Flores mei fructus”. Ratio est, quia deus, “qui operatur omnia in omnibus”, Cor. 1, et Is. 26: “omnia opera nostra operatus es nobis, domine”, ipse est “principium et finis”, Apoc. 1 et c. 2, “primus et novissimus”, Is. 4. Ipse ergo flos ut principium, fructus ut finis’.

*fructificavi* (bear new growth)  
*suavitatem* (charm, sweetness)  
*flos* (flower, blossom)  
*flores* (flourish, youthful)  
*fructus* (enjoy, delight in)  
*fructum* (breathe, live)  
*fructui* (produce, crops, fruit)  
*odour* (smell, scent, aroma)  
*naris* (nose)  
*gustus* (tasting, appetite)  
*servit* (join, entwine)

#### 5.4 Analogies

These words cited above saturated with sensory stimuli, they on the one hand, denote actual physical and objective realities like vines, grapes, shoots, fruits, crops and so forth; but they also connote abstract states of being such as pleasure, enjoyment, fertility and so forth. However, these imageries also become in the epistemology of Eckhart an intellectual process that not only reshapes physical realities of vine, fruits and so on; but these realities further become markers for the metaphysical and *mystical* relationships between the soul and the Divine.

Intellectually also, Eckhart enunciates some of his major themes that form the bedrock of his ontological and theological systems by making connections between, for example, the following binary systems: *principium et finis* (God as principle or beginning, and God as end or final cause respectively); *esse a se* and *esse ab alio* (necessary existence in contrast to dependent existence); *essentia* or ‘whatness’ of God in contrast to God’s appropriated attributes; *esse virtuale* and *esse formale* (virtual existence in contrast to formal existence); *ipse esse* (God as Existence Itself ) and *esse omnium* (God existing in all things).

In the analogy of the flower, in its sweetness and appeal to the senses; in its fertile and productive properties; in its essential properties, reside the power, or the very essence of the plant. In this floral analogy, Eckhart sees a parallel between the flower’s

essence and the divine essence or existence. That analogously, the procreative activities of the flower mirror God's sweetness, and procreative capacities.

Likewise, just as one cannot separate the fragrance from the flower – it is the principle of the flower which gives it delight and assists in its regeneration, and the principle may be summed by this paradoxical question: *Is the flower sweet because it is a flower, or is it a flower because it is sweet?* The answer is that these characteristics: sweetness, essence and existence are not mutually exclusive; they are one and the same thing.

In the same way, God cannot be separated from his creation or his creation separated from Him, for as Eckhart observes: Reason is, for God is, 'who works all in all' [and is in us]. He is the beginning and end. The first and the last. I am therefore, as principle the enjoyment of the flower as first and last: 'Ratio est, quia deus, "qui operatur omnia in omnibus"' or 'Ipse ergo flos ut principle fructus ut finis'.<sup>367</sup>

To conclude, a seemingly innocuous and simple phrase such as 'flower and core' embodies a plethora of sexual motifs which as we have seen can be appropriately applied to Eckhart's foundational message of the *Birth of the Son in the Soul*, a motif that has erotic and sexual implications, even if they are theologised, metaphoricised, and spiritualised.

### 5.5 Sexual imageries of divine love

Love is pre-eminently and predominantly a major theme in Eckhart's writings, and I shall explore several of his works to show the importance of this topic, and in the process of discussing Eckhart's view on love, tease out some of the rich and varied loadstones of sexual imageries that his writings conceal. A complex, but a good starting point from which to obtain an understanding of Eckhart's concept of love, and its connected metaphors is to examine Latin Sermon IV/1 (LW IV)<sup>368</sup> – *From him, through him and in him are all things*, Rom. 11:36 – along with another two Eckhart sermons: Romans 5:5 – 'God's love is poured out' (*caritas dei diffusa est*)<sup>369</sup>, – and Latin *Sermo*

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<sup>367</sup> LW II 247, 18.

<sup>368</sup> LW IV 22: 'Ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia', Rom.11:36. See also McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, 212.

<sup>369</sup> *Sermo* IV/1 n. 25 (LW IV 26,8ff.).

VI/1 (LW IV) – *God is Love (deus caritas est)* -1 John 4:8.<sup>370</sup> In all these sermons, Eckhart lays out a metaphysical account of love.

If one wanted to know what God really is then Eckhart provides the answer. ‘God’ he says: ‘is called love absolutely’.<sup>371</sup> God’s essence then, as Eckhart further informs us, consists of ‘his purest and most complete simplicity, and ... his priority over all things’; and although God’s proper status consists ‘in equal measure of wisdom, beauty and the like’, love is better than these other essential qualities because ‘love is unifying and diffusive’.<sup>372</sup>

## 5.6 Unity, diffusion and love

‘Love is unifying and diffusive’.<sup>373</sup> That is to say, love is the power behind the two basic metaphysical processes of unity and diffusion.<sup>374</sup> However, unity and diffusion do not relate to love as such, but they are love’s acting. Moreover, this love in action develops from what Eckhart had stated in his argument before, that God is love ‘in abstracto’ – in abstract.<sup>375</sup> *In abstracto*, means God as pure ground, as Being without acting. In other words, God is of the most pure simplicity; he is prior to and in everything. He is simple Being; that everything is in him, and that he alone beatifies; that He alone is eternal and not temporal. He is the reason *Why*. He is *in abstracto*, and all *who, or all that desire to be united with him need to become beyond time*.<sup>376</sup>

In contrast to such an abstraction, God as love would not be what love is, if love did not equate to acting. Thus, love is acting, by being both *unifying* and *diffusive*. This then begs the question: Is there a hierarchy or a priority in these two ways of acting –

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<sup>370</sup> LW IV 50-6. See also F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 212-214.

<sup>371</sup> LW IV 50,52, *Per hoc quod deus nominatur caritas in abstracto* ....

<sup>372</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>373</sup> LW IV 5,2 *amor est uniens, diffusivus*.

<sup>374</sup> F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 215, note 3.

<sup>375</sup> LW IV 52,1ff. ‘Per hoc quod deus nominatur caritas in abstracto, primo probatur dei mnimoda et purissima simplicitas, et ex hoc eius in omnibus prioritas, immo ipsum esse simplex esse, Exodi 3: “ego sum qui sum”. Ex quo patet in ipso esse omnia et haberi, Tob. 10: “omnia in te uno habentes”. Ex quo ulterius patet quod ipse solus beatificat, tum quia in ipso solo omnia sunt, tum quia omnia unum. Ex quo patet tertio quia est quid aeternum nec subiectus tempori. Volentes igitur uniri oportet supra tempus fieri’. Transl.: ‘Owing to the fact that God is called love abstractly or absolutely, the first thing demonstrated is his purest and most complete simplicity, and from this his priority over all things ... From out of this it follows that he alone makes blessed, both because all things are in him alone, and because they are all one in him. ... He is something eternal and not subject to time...’.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid. LW IV 52,7-8.

unity and diffusion – when we no longer look at God ‘in abstracto’? We shall discuss this point later. But for now, let us continue to elaborate on the theme of love.

God is love, ‘*Deus caritas est*’ (Ioh. 4:8)<sup>377</sup> declares Eckhart echoing St. John’s apprehension of the nature of God. Eckhart runs with this foundational thesis and unveils the hidden nature of love by the following points:

1. Disclosing the absoluteness or the abstractness of God’s love
2. Revealing that this love is not remote at all; that it engages with the cosmos.

Eckhart therefore, shows the dynamic nature of God’s love, both in its potentiality and actuality by evoking a set of neo-Platonic principles called unity and diffusion but which principles he promptly negates. It was these principles that addressed the age-old questions of: How out of One can come many?

Such a question had dogged many metaphysicians for centuries, and Eckhart himself alludes to this baffling question as to how a multitude can come immediately from the Simple One, which is God.<sup>378</sup> Eckhart’s own solution to this problem is: ‘... the whole universe [is] one totally (as the name implies, because universe means ‘one’) comes from the Simple One, one from the One in a primal and immediate way’.<sup>379</sup>

The central problem also that Eckhart seems to want to resolve here is this: How out of original unity, called the One can there be diffusions or emanations into parts or multiples? But his resolution is very ingenious and departs from the Neo-Platonic schema by suggesting that there are actually no metaphysical separations or outflows from the One; but rather, if there are any movements, these take place strictly in the One, and that any movement is certainly not a series of gradations from the One.

That, if there were to be any movement, that this movement is circular in nature. However, strictly speaking, any movement is not even circular, for Eckhart asks us to picture a circle covered all around with dots and with a point in the centre. See the diagram below.

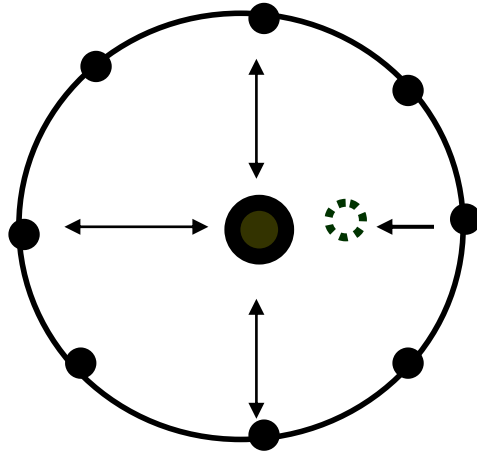
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<sup>377</sup> LW IV 50.

<sup>378</sup> ‘Et sic perit quaestio et difficultas, multos gravans usque hodie, quomodo ab uno simplici, quod est deus, possint esse multa immediate’. LW II 356,36-41. Also see F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 153.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid LW II 356,46ff. So, ‘just as God is one simple thing in existence in every way, but is “multiple in conceptuality” so too the universe is one thing (“The world is one”) but is multiple in parts and distinct things. Therefore, something that is one but multiple in parts comes from the one God who is multiple in conceptuality’. See also F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 153.

## The circle and centrality of God's love



We get a better understanding of what Eckhart means by God's love by picturing a circle covered all around with dots and with a point in the centre as drawn above. Eckhart says:

... we cannot love God without first knowing Him: but the essential point which is God, stands there in the centre, equally far from and near to all creatures, and the only way of getting closer to it is for my natural intellect to be displaced by a light that surpasses it.<sup>380</sup>

The dots in relation to the centre would be 'equally near or far' he says, and that for one dot to get nearer to the centre it would have to be displaced, for the middle point remains constantly at the centre. His picture which is a metaphor for natural love is meant to show several things: the equality of God's love for all creatures; the constancy of God; that in order to get closer to God, then displacement or detachment has to take place as seen by the *broken dotted circle* moving away from the periphery towards the centre. By this representation, Eckhart also uses it as teaching moment to say that we should favour each other equally as God favours each person without partiality.

Eckhart tells that the One is in the centre of the circle, and that everything elsewhere revolves around this centre, and is attracted to the centre. Thus for Eckhart, the universe is a closed system, and there is no more any outflow from the One than there is any unregulated outflow or leakage of blood from a healthy body.

Analogically then, creation takes the form or the imprint of the One; that is, it is the conception or reflection of the One, and so the One is therefore the universe's *life*

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<sup>380</sup> DW III Pr. 75, 560/298, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 281.



*blood* or its sustainer. Thus, the One is not separate or distinct from its creation. There really is no diffusion from the One or any return to the One, but rather the whole creation is, as Eckhart constantly reminds us, one unity; and, although it is composite, it is *single* and *simple*, because it resides in the One, and: ‘All things are from him, and through him and in him’ (*ex ipso, per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia*, (Rom. 11:36)).<sup>381</sup>

For Eckhart, just as there is no divide between God and man, between heaven and earth, body and soul, there is also no divide between unity and diffusion, both are one in the One: because the One is *indistinct* (in-distinct means, he is not distinct, he is not apart, but he is one with) already by virtue of his *abstractness* or *absoluteness*, he is entirely engaged, acting through the processes of *unity* and *diffusion* which are, in fact, *two sides of the same coin*

Furthermore, there is no hierarchical arrangement or division between unity and diffusion. It is not the *chicken and egg* (of which came first) dilemma. This is why Eckhart could say, citing Macrobius:

The One which is called the Monad, that is unity, is not a number, but is the source and origin of all number. The beginning and the end of all things, itself not knowing beginning nor end, it refers to the supreme God.... It creates innumerable kinds of genera from itself and contains them within itself.... When it pours itself into the immensity of the universe, it undergoes no separation from its unity.<sup>382</sup>

Eckhart further says: ‘Amor est uniens, diffusivus ... incipit ubi intellectus cessat’,<sup>383</sup> which is to say, love is greater than intellect, and it is at that point at which intellect stops, that love begins; so love is supra-sensory, is transcendent – *Love is divine* – but because of its divine abstractness, it is concrete and yet ultra-sensory. This provides the basis for Eckhart to develop his very sensible and sensitive sexual imagery. He uses unity and diffusion to explain the subtleties of the Godhead, the Trinity, the

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<sup>381</sup> LW IV 22.

<sup>382</sup> LW III 484, 60ff. quoting Macrobius: ‘»unum quod monas, id est unitas, dicitur«, ut ait Macrobius, »non numerus, sed fons et origo omnium numerorum« est, »initium finisque omnium, principium et finis nesciens ad summum refertur deum«, »innumerabiles species et de se creat et intra se continet«, et »cum se immensitati universitatis infundat, nullum init cum sua unitate divortium«. Hucusque verba Macrobius’.

<sup>383</sup> LW IV 51: ‘Secundo dic quare potius caritas dicitur, cum pari modo sit sapientia, decor et similia, scilicet quia amor est uniens, diffusivus. Item tertio, incipit ubi intellectus cessat. Iuxta hoc expone illud: »qui sedes super Cherubim«. Pertracta quomodo caritas sive amor est uniens, et quanta est illa unio. Item, quomodo se totum diffundit amor in abstracto’ (‘Secondly, you must tell why he is better called love, when he is in equal measure wisdom, beauty and the likes, the reason is that love is unifying and dissuasive; ... love begins where intellect stops...’).

Soul and the cosmos,<sup>384</sup> but he does so not solely in abstract ways, but because God in his abstractness is concrete.

Eckhart not only dares, but consequently needs to indulge in his non-formal, poetic language. To him, God as divine love is not solely oneness, perhaps not even primarily *in abstracto*, but is ‘diffusivus’, he is an emanating, generating, irradiating power grounded in unity?<sup>385</sup> Love is however the key as we have seen to the conundrum of how from pure unity can multiples arise yet still retain unity. This is possible because love takes the form of: origin (The One); divine likeness to the One (The Son); and heat (The Holy Spirit)<sup>386</sup> according to Eckhart, as he writes in his *Book of Divine Consolation*:

We attribute likeness in the divinity to the Son, heat and love to the Holy Spirit. Likeness in all things, but more so and first of all in the divine nature, is the birth of the One, and the likeness of the One, in the One and with the One; it is the beginning and origin of flowering, fiery love. The One is the beginning without any beginning.

Likeness is the beginning of the One alone, and it receives *that it is*, and that is, beginning, from the One and in the One. It is the nature of love that it flows and springs up and out of two as one. One as one does not produce love, two as two does not produce love; two as one perforce produces natural, consenting, fiery love. Solomon says that all waters, that is all created things, flow and turn back to their beginning (Qo. 1:7).

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<sup>384</sup> LW II 356,36ff.: ‘... omne agens per se semper intendit ipsum totum, puta artifex domum, partes autem non nisi propter totum et in toto, sic agens primum, deus, per se et primo produxit et creavit universum habens omnia, singula vero, utpote partes universi et partes omnium, non nisi propter universum et in universo. Et sic perit quaestio et difficultas, multos gravans usque hodie, quomodo ab uno simplici, quod est deus’ (‘... every agent of itself always intends the whole [e.g. the architect in relation to a house thinks of the parts only in and for the whole], so too God, the First Agent, of himself and first of all produces and creates the universe having all things, but creates individual things as parts of the universe and of the whole, and only for and in the universe. This answers the question and difficulty that has bothered many up to today about how a multitude can come immediately from the Simple One, which is God’). transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 153.

<sup>385</sup> LW III 484, 60ff. Eckhart explains how by quoting Macrobius: ‘»unum quod monas, id est unitas, dicitur«, ut ait Macrobius, »non numerus, sed fons et origo omnium numerorum« est, »initium finisque omnium, principium et finis nesciens ad summum refertur deum«, »innumerabiles species et de se creat et intra se continet«, et »cum se immensitati universitatis infundat, nullum init cum sua unitate divortium«. Hucusque verba Macrobi’ (‘The One which is called the Monad, that is unity, is not a number, but is the source and origin of all number. The beginning and the end of all things, itself not knowing beginning nor end, it refers to the supreme God ... It creates innumerable kinds of genera from itself and contains them within itself... When it pours itself into the immensity of the universe, it undergoes no separation from its unity’). transl. McGinn *et al.*, *Teacher and Preacher*, 185.

<sup>386</sup> Transl. E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 221.

As we have observed before, the several properties of love, come from the One, remain in the one, and they are all One. Love also, as we have seen, is God *in abstracto*; yet, at the same time, love manifests itself as unity and diffusion. Is it possible for the universe to go beyond time, and to partake in God's abstractness or unity? Yes! but, in order to do so: 'Those wishing to be united with him must', says Eckhart, 'come to be above time' (*Volentes igitur uniri oportet supra tempus fieri*).<sup>387</sup> It is here in this radical and tantalizing phrase that a sexual union is implied in Eckhart's exposition of love.

### 5.7 Sexual intimations

Eckhart's expression: 'Those wishing to be united with him must come to be above time' is a telling one. It is about union, a sexual union which climaxes in an orgasmic experience. Eckhart's love metaphors are so beguiling that we can so easily pass them off as metaphysical hyperbole. But his love metaphors are so intense and incessant, that lies hidden within them are intensely erotic urgings and desires. For instance, when Eckhart says: 'God is love first because he's common to all, excluding none',<sup>388</sup>

What is Eckhart saying here? In the first place, he is saying that love is not just mere feelings or sentiments, but this love is potentially and actually the act of generating, procreating and begetting. It is this love that embodies paternity / maternity / sonship and spiritness; and it is this love which is at the root, or is the cause of all existences including, the very existence of the One Himself. This is why Eckhart in his *Commentary* on a verse from *Wisdom* could say, 'He created all things that they might be' (Ws. 1:14). He further adds: '...that if someone asks why God "created all things" that is the whole universe, the answer should be "that they might be"'.<sup>389</sup> God takes pleasure in generating that things exist because He exists.

Secondly, in addition to this abstract characterisation of God, Eckhart reveals the erotic side of God which he makes evident in *Sermo* 41<sup>390</sup> by using a language that

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<sup>387</sup> LW IV 50,59. See also F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 212.

<sup>388</sup> LW IV 51, 53 "Deus caritas est", primo, quia caritas communis est, nullum excludens. Ex qua communitate nota duo. Primo, quod deus communis est: omne ens et omne omnium esse ipse est, "in ipso, per ipsum et ab ipso".

<sup>389</sup> F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 149.

<sup>390</sup> DW II *Pr.* 41, 287,1-4, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 5-6.

at first seems to make God an *a-sexual* ascetic being. But on closer inspection, the apparent sexual disinterestedness of God is not the case, but rather it is the opposite; for, the language that Eckhart uses to characterise love shows that God's love is very sexually oriented towards his creatures. Eckhart tells how by revealing to us that:

‘God wishes always to be alone ...’, and as a corollary to this claim, that ‘we should only have God on our mind’. But soon after this apparent sexual chastity or this mirrored loneliness of God is reflected, God's love is actually seen to be a *shared* desire for union; that is, for God to have a loving relationship with all his creatures.

However, this sharing or belongingness of his love for all his creatures simultaneously is more than that of *commonality*; for, this wish of God to love, and to be loved is a love of *exclusivity* as demonstrated by the statement that: ‘God wants to have us only for himself and we should be available for no one else but Him, for we must always have Him alone in mind’. Now, this ‘having him in our mind, and him having us in his mind’ realisation – which is about *necessity* and *desirableness* – goes to the very root of love, and this is what constitutes God's very nature.

Is this therefore, this realisation about the nature of God's love that allows Eckhart to go on to say: ‘God has ... poured out satisfaction and joy into creatures, but the root of all satisfaction, and the essence of all joy – these God has kept back in Himself ...’. <sup>391</sup> The terms *satisfaction* and *root of satisfaction*, in the context of this palpable sexual *milieu*, seem to suggest that some orgasmic engagement has occurred, and this view seems a reasonable deduction to make seeing that Eckhart again reiterates the point that *God would have us for Himself alone, and for no one else*.

God therefore, we might surmise, based on Eckhart's propositions, is so *lustful*, *jealous*, and *possessive* in his love for us, that He stops at nothing to attract and gain our attention to the point where:

God dresses up and offers himself to the soul, and endeavours with his entire divinity, to snuggle with the soul, because he alone would like to thrill the soul and in this he does not want to have a rival. God does not stand a crowd, nor does he want that something else is being looked out for, nor longed for except himself.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>392</sup> DW II Pr. 41, 295,1-4, transl. M. Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 45.

The amorous nature of God is dramatically played out in the expressions ‘God does not stand a crowd’ and ‘nor does he want for something else is being looked out for nor longed for except himself’. For what Eckhart actually intends to convey to us, although according to Vinzent, translations have watered down<sup>393</sup> the voluptuousness nature of Eckhart’s love talk, is a picture of:

- (i) A female within a crowd of lovers who all long for her, and
- (ii) She also as a single female in that crowd of admiring suitors longs for each one in that group of lovers. The narrative here is about desire, yearning, unfulfilled wishes, fantasizing, longing for sexual intimacy, and for bodies, minds and whatever else to unite – to be no more two, but one. These states represent sexual feelings which are intense, passionate, untamed and even lascivious in proportions, and in Eckhart’s scheme of things, these erotic drives are part of God. They must be so, if Eckhart’s off-repeated dictum ‘in ipso, per ipsum et ab ipso’<sup>394</sup> in Romans 11:36 is anything to go by.

The various players: the female and the crowd of lovers, all seek the same thing – that is union. They, although many, are one in their aim and ambition. That is, they are united in their desire for love. Love is their ultimate aim. In the case of the female, she as an individual is longed for by a crowd of lovers; they want her exclusively for themselves. But in contrast, she longs for intimacy with one and all in the crowd. Her love is therefore general. Analogically then, this tells us that God’s love is both particular and general; it is precious, but common. Indeed, says Eckhart: ‘Deus communis est’,<sup>395</sup> that is to say, He is owned by everyone and everything, and He owns everyone and everything.

God as one, shares with the crowd (the many) the desire for intimacy, but He also shares with the soul the desire for union, sameness, intimacy and unicity; and at the same time, both the crowd and the soul in reciprocity wish to have sameness with God – i.e. union. This longing or *lust* on the part of the human actors is for physical intimacy,

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<sup>393</sup> The *Quint* translation smoothes out the text (‘gedrenge’ is rendered as ‘Einschränkung’ – ‘restriction/reservation’) and gets rid of the picture of a female within a crowd of lovers longing for her [or] she in the midst of a crowd of males looking out for her, indicated by ‘gedrenge,’ translated as ‘crowd’ which is the normal translation of this middle high German word.

<sup>394</sup> LW IV 51,53ff.

<sup>395</sup> LW IV 51,53 ‘quod deus communis est’.

whereas for God, the longing echoes more an *epithalamium* – a bridal song – that lyricises and spiritualises the consummation or blissful union between himself and the soul. Such an intimacy between God and the soul although employing erotic imageries is nonetheless transcendent. ‘The transcendent is transcendental, which means, it is common to everything’.<sup>396</sup>

As we have suggested, the female lover, and her male admirers long for sexual engagement while for God and the soul their longing is for spiritual intimacy, but although all the parties are diverse in numbers, their desires still have one single objective – that is union. So unity having led to diffusion, diffusion now leads back to unity. That is, the One diffuses or disperses himself; while the many or disparate parts reintegrate themselves to form a unified whole. For as Eckhart informs us:

By necessity, God needed to pour himself out. He would have burst if He had not poured Himself out all at once, for no creature existed into whom He could pour Himself out altogether, and therefore He begot a Son into whom He could pour Himself out altogether.

Furthermore: ‘God does not give up, to give us everything; and had he sworn to stop, he couldn’t do other but must give us. He is in greater need to give us than we are in receiving’.<sup>397</sup>

When people ask for example what is the purpose of life? Eckhart would say there is no purpose apart from existence. That is: existence is its own purpose. But more precisely, existence is God. He goes on to inform us that: ‘Every generation breathes love, rest, satisfaction and delight, and is a kind of trinity of one who generates, [Father] one generated (or delight) [Son] and satisfaction or love’ [Holy Spirit].<sup>398</sup>

Ostensibly in this Trinitarian justification that is seemingly couched in Neo-Platonic formulations, we have the narrative of life forces and these forces are of an erotica-spiritual nature; and this creation script has as its cues, physical markers such as *love, rest, satisfaction and delight*. It therefore seems evident that these expressions of *love, rest, satisfaction and delight* are code words that represent the acme of sexual pleasures, but these pleasures are now sublimated by being turned in erotically ecstatic utterances.

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<sup>396</sup> J. A. Aertsen, *Meister Eckhart* (1999), 16.

<sup>397</sup> DW IV *Pr.* 99, 260,42-46, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 133.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.* 150.

God's love then runs on two parallel tracks, and like a rail track, both lines although individuated, combine to (a) support the *train* of love, (b) lead to the same destination. Both tracks are thus supportive and complementary. God's love is therefore one in aim, objective and destination. Furthermore, the two tracks of God's love converge to form as it were an erotic *super-highway*. For on one side of the track – the spiritual side – God's love represents a procreative cycle that addresses the whole plan of existence and the creation of the cosmos; and on the other side of the track – the erotic side – sexual or libidinal forces function as drivers for physical love, human intimacies, and other forms of sexual encounters. But both forces are inseparable from the One, and both are contained in the One, and it is these erotica-spiritual forces that unite divinity to humanity and *vice versa*.

While the language of sex for Eckhart might be concealed by strange allegories and expressions like *bullitio* and *ebullitio*;<sup>399</sup> this language, although it represents ontological realities like the Godhead, The Trinity, and creation; and, other cosmological and biological processes; they are also metaphors for orgasmic and sexual

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<sup>399</sup> Eckhart, *Commentary on Exodus* and references to *bullitio* and *ebullition*, for example in LW II 22ff.: '... indicat; rursus ipsius esse quandam in se ipsum et super se ipsum reflexivam conversionem et in se ipso mansionem sive fixationem; adhuc autem quandam bullitionem [bullitio] sive parturitionem sui - in se fervens et in se ipso et in se ipsum liquescens et bulliens, lux in luce et in lucem se toto se totum penetrans, et se toto super ...' ('... It also indicates a reflexive turning back of his existence into itself and upon itself and its dwelling and remaining fixed in itself. It further indicates a "boiling" or giving birth to itself – glowing in itself, and melting and boiling in and into itself, light that totally forces its whole being in light and into light and that is everywhere totally turned back and reflected upon itself...'). *Sermo* XLIX (49) 'Whose are these image and inscription'? (Matt. 22:20). LW II 22: '... se totum conversum et reflexum undique ...'; LW IV 426: 'Ioh. 1 dicitur: "in ipso vita erat"'. 'Vita enim quondam dicit exseritionem, qua res in se ipsa intumescens se profundit primo in se toto, quodlibet sui in quodlibet sui, antequam effundat et ebulliat extra ...' (John 1 says, 'In him was life.' (John 1:4) "'Life' expresses a type of 'pushing out' by which something swells up in itself and first breaks out totally in itself, each part into each part, before it pours itself forth and 'boils over' [ebullitio] on the outside....'); 'Est ergo imago emanatio ab intimis in silentio et exclusione omnis forinseci, vita quaedam, ac si imageris rem ex se ipsa et in se ipsa intumescere et bullire in se ipsa necdum cointellecta ebullitione ...'. ('The image then is an emanation from the depths in silence, excluding everything that comes from without. It is a form of life, as if you were to imagine something swelling up from itself and in itself and then inwardly "boiling" without any "boiling over" yet understood ...'); '... siquidem modo quo bonum sui diffusivum; praeterea quo modo velle principiaet fine nondum cointellecto. Secundus gradus est quasi ebullitio sub ratione efficientis et in ordine finis, quo modo producit quid a se ipso, sed non de se ipso...'. ('This is the way [boiling without boiling over] the Good diffuses itself. This is also how the power of willing can be a principle even if the end is not yet grasped. The second stage is like the "boiling over" in the manner of an efficient cause and with a view toward an end by which something produces something else that is from itself, but not out of itself ...'). Transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 46; 236-237.

arousals between humanity and divinity even if such erotic talk is spiritualised and couched in metaphysics and in *theologics*.

According to that saying of the sage quotes Eckhart: ‘The monad gives birth to the monad, and reflected love or ardent desire back upon itself’.<sup>400</sup> ‘Sage’ seems to refer to Aristotle, and indirectly the word references *Liber de Causis*, a book of unknown origin. And ‘The monad gives birth to the monad ...’ is taken from the opening of the *Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers* which contains ideas from Proclus, Plotinus and other Neo-Platonists. Proclus sees the activities of the One as a threefold movement of remaining-procession-reversion, i.e. *moné*, *proodos*, and *epistrophe*.

These three expressions in sum, mean: The Intellect remains in the One; the Intellect proceeds from the One, as a separate entity; the Intellect returns to the One, and receives the good which is its identity from the One. When Eckhart is referring to this schema he tries to show that the relationship between the One and its constitutive whole is not just intellective in scope, but it also has an affective content; this is, *desire*. Desire climaxing into *ebullitio* is the basis for a fertile, procreative, creative and productive relationship between One and the cosmos.

Love for Eckhart then, underlies unity and diffusion, but both concepts comprise a single procreative act, where instantaneously and simultaneously, the Father generates the Son, and the Son and Father breathe the Spirit; and they between themselves generate the whole cosmos including the soul; and, the soul in reciprocity gives birth back to divinity.

Eckhart further discusses love in another one of his German homilies *Deus caritas est* (1 John 4:16), and says:

God pursues all creatures with His love, that they may desire to love God. If I were asked what God is, I would answer: ‘God is a good that pursues all creatures with love so that they may pursue Him in turn’ – so great is the joy God feels in being pursued by creatures.<sup>401</sup>

So here again, we see this relentless pursuit or chase in which God is engaged to woo His creatures. Such a preoccupation with his creatures were it a human endeavour

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<sup>400</sup> Eckhart, *Commentary on Exodus* 16, LW II, transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 46.

<sup>401</sup> DW III Pr. 63, Josef Quint (1976) 516.75.3-4. transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 219.



would border on a fatal attraction and would be considered an unhealthy obsession; but not so with God; for that is His nature according to Eckhart as God cannot do otherwise.

For yet again Eckhart informs us that God's whole purpose is to produce, to generate, to *copulate* so to speak. For '...it is the nature of the Father to give birth to His Son, and it is the Son's nature for me to be begotten in him and according to his nature; it is the nature of the Holy Ghost that I should be burnt up therein and melted and reduced till I become nothing but love'.<sup>402</sup> Such language cannot be glossed over as mere linguistic flamboyance, but even if that were the case, it is clear to see that it needs no great powers of interpretation to understand that this language is very sexually loaded and highly charged with great romantic and erotic fervour.

More of this sexually laden language is captured in Eckhart's treatment of Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother. 'Elizabeth's time was fulfilled and she bore a son' recites Eckhart.<sup>403</sup> Now Eckhart uses this birth narrative as a backdrop for sexual union and birthing. In effect, he is equating Elizabeth's 'fullness of time' to a heightened sexual experience, an experience that 'go beyond time and temporal things, and when this happens' discloses Eckhart, 'we are free and always happy'.

He tells us why: 'Because God's Son is born in us'. So a productive orgasmic experience then is analogically Elizabeth's 'fullness of time' and such a time is joyous, timeless, and in fact 'beyond time'. This ecstatic experience because of a sexual encounter results in a birth, not necessarily an actual birth, but the generation of the birth of joy, happiness and peace for both, God himself and us, as according to Eckhart, the birth of the Son in us, is the re-birth of the Son in the Father.

Eckhart proceeds to tell us more about the intensity of the sexual pleasure by using an analogy of 'fire and wood'. He says that fire, for it to burn must penetrate the wood and must become like the wood, and in the process of this combustion, the following process occurs: 'First it makes warm, then hot, then it smokes and crackles on account of its unlikeness: and the hotter the wood gets, the more still and quiet it

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<sup>402</sup> DW II Pr. 39, Josef Quint (1976), 686 264/3-5, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 100.

<sup>403</sup> DW I Pr. 11, J. Quint (1958) 472.1, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 157.

becomes, and the more like the fire, the more peaceful it is, until it becomes all fire. If the fire is to press the wood into itself, all unlikeness must be cast out.’<sup>404</sup>

Eckhart leaves us in no doubt as to what his intentions are in his Homily *Manete in me* (Abide in Me) in which he says:

If therefore, you want to abide in Him, you must love Him for nothing but Himself ... [you] must take God not as being good or just [i.e. not in his mere properties], but [you] must apprehend Him in the pure and naked substance where He is nakedly apprehending Himself. For goodness and justice are God’s garment which covers him. Therefore, strip God of all His clothing – seize him naked in his robing-room, where He is uncovered and bare in Himself. Then you will ‘abide in Him.’<sup>405</sup>

In this case sexual excitations between God and the soul is located in the robing-room, next to the bed-chamber. Abiding in God is being together, body with body, naked skin to naked skin; and more, it is not only being close to each other, but it is penetrating into God and resting, abiding in Him. Again, we cannot help but feel that with these strange allegories and strong metaphoric messages, the nature of sexuality and orgasmic arousals that are taking place between lovers is the coded signal for the most intimate theology, the union between God and his creatures.

### 5.8 God is trivial and precious

As we have discussed before, God’s love is diffused because (1) his love is common to all, and it excludes none. He is common, not in terms of cheapness, or triviality gauged on the calculus of economics, but the commonness of his love is in a paradoxical way (2) trivial in a metaphysical sense and in this sense at the same time precious and indispensable, for ‘He is every being and the whole existence of all things’. The term *common* is an interesting one.

What is Eckhart saying here? He seems to be echoing Pausanias’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*. Another name for love is Aphrodite, and this love according to Pausanias is two-fold in nature consisting of Aphrodite Celestial and Aphrodite Common.<sup>406</sup> These two loves have different functions, Common love amongst other

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<sup>404</sup> DW II *Pr.* 11, Quint [para. 1] 473, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 158-159.

<sup>405</sup> DW II *Pr.* 40, Josef Quint (1971), 687.274/2-7, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 117-18.

<sup>406</sup> *Symposium* 181 b, c.

things is sensual, 'it is attracted to bodies rather than to minds', whereas Celestial love deals with minds, 'it makes people feel affection for what is inherently stronger and more intelligent'.<sup>407</sup>

Now interpreting Eckhart's idea of love as being common is in the first instance, to take the first part of Pausanias' two-fold description of Love. That is the common part. Thus, on one hand, God's love is sensual, erotic and lustful; and on the other hand his love is celestial and aims at the mind and ultimately the soul. This love is higher, and is in effect *caritas*.

Furthermore, common love suggests something that is general; that is freely available to all; easily accessible, cheap, inexpensive and so forth. At one level this commonness is good in as much as oxygen which is commonly and freely available to all is good. This commonness is communal, and thus this commonality of love suggests impartiality and generosity. So at one level, God's love in all its plenitude and munificence is freely available to all.

However, the notion of love being common suggests that it is *cheap*, and this cheapness of love seems to devalue or even taint its importance or uniqueness. For common love cannot maintain or sustain a sincere and loving relationship between a couple who have pledged to forsake all others' love. Such a common love therefore, seems purely appetitive and sensual, and as such it is devoid of emotional and spiritual *gravitas*. Such a love then seems unworthy of those whose love is exclusively and devotedly set apart for just one person.

This observation is true for human love where jealousy is often the driving force behind love. But God's love does not have the hallmarks of human love; it is not subject

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<sup>407</sup> Although Pausanias relates common love to affairs with boys, a term which we nowadays call pederasty which modern society totally disapproves of, many teenage males in ancient Greece were under the tutelage of benefactors and tutors, and they were often used for their master's sexual gratification. But even then Pausanias recognises the tensions between both loves - Celestial and common - for the boys, and he was in favour of laws being passed to prevent exploitation of younger boys. He says: 'A further distinction can be made among men who are sexually attracted towards boys: only some are motivated by a pure form of Celestial Love, in the sense that they don't have affairs with boys who are younger than the age at which intelligence begins to form, which more or less coincides with when they begin to grow a beard. It seems to me that not having affairs until then is a sign that one is ready to enter into a lifelong relationship and partnership, as opposed to intending to dupe the boy by getting on friendly terms with him while he's still young and foolish, and then scornfully abandoning him and running off to someone else'. He further adds: 'There even ought to be a law against having affairs with young boys to prevent all that time and effort being spent on an unprofitable matter'. (Symposium, 181d).

to the whims and fancies of human foibles, nor is it racked with emotional guilt. God's love is absolutely and abstractly love – not a part of love or just a mere reflection of love, but total love. So this then is the paradox of God's love: on one hand it is common, but on the other hand it is sublime. However, both aspects of love are what drive God's love. God's love is a kind of divine lust,<sup>408</sup> and as such it is analogous to eros.

Eckhart further gives us more information about God's love. He says: 'And I say that God's godhead depends on him making himself common to everything that is receptive of him; and did he not make himself common, he were not God'.<sup>409</sup> This statement leads Vincent to remark: "Eckhart thinks about bed and sex. He asks us to look into God's cupboard and then to face him naked."<sup>410</sup> God is driven beyond benevolence and goodness,<sup>411</sup> as any lover is forced beyond limits and *ratio*, taken away from abstinence, moderation or self-discipline, and so God does indulge in 'lust'.'<sup>412</sup>

By common love, Eckhart means: 'He is every being and the whole existence of all things. God is the best that can be thought or desired by each and every person –

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<sup>408</sup> See, for example, DW I *Pr.* 19, 317,6-318,1: 'Dâ gebirt der vater sînen sun und hât sô grôzen lust in dem worte und im ist sô gar lieb dar zuo, daz er niemer ûfgehœret, er enspreche alle zît daz wort, daz ist über zît'.

<sup>409</sup> See DW III *Pr.* 73, 265,7-9: 'Und ich spriche, daz sîn gotheit hanget dar ane, daz er sich gemeinen müge allem dem, daz sîn enpfenclich ist; und engemeinete er sich niht, sô enwære er niht got'; N. Llargier, note to *Pr.* 4, in: *Meister Eckhart: Werke I-II*. ed. id. (1993), I 783: 'Daß Gottes Wesen darin bestehe, zu geben, ist ein Leitgedanke Eckharts, der seinen stärksten Ausdruck in der Wendung findet, daß Gott geben 'müsse', wenn der Mensch sich ihm öffne'.

<sup>410</sup> M. Vincent, *The Art of Detachment* (2011), 47; see DW II *Pr.* 40, 272,5-274,6; see the very short summary in the second verse of the mystical poem *Ein meister der seit vns das wesen blos*: 'He (the man of Ettesingen) is a good preacher/speaks to us of a power/ that is itself / its essence is its activity / always being bare / without having beginning nor end, but being without form' ('Der von ettesingen ist ein gut phaffe /er saget vns von einer kraft/dv ist ir selbes ist/ir wesen ist ir wirken si ist alze male blos/si enhat begin noch ende dc ist formelos'), published in: K. Ruh, *Mystische Spekulationen in Reimversen* (1973) (1984), 192-4, 192 ('contains the core of Eckhart's teaching', so Ruh *ibid.* 195). The similar concept in M. Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit* (<sup>3</sup>1975; <sup>1</sup>1947) 46.

<sup>411</sup> See for example *Pr.* 18;19.

<sup>412</sup> See, for example, DW I *Pr.* 19, 317,6-318,1: 'Dâ gebirt der vater sînen sun und hât sô grôzen lust in dem worte und im ist sô gar lieb dar zuo, daz er niemer ûfgehœret, er enspreche alle zît daz wort, daz ist über zît'. Similarly Eckhart, DW II *Pr.* 31, 117,1f.; DW II *Pr.* 39, 263,3f.; DW II *Pr.* 39, 37f. in an alternative (although corrupted) version where Eckhart talks about God's 'great pleasure to give away all his nature' ('so grozen wollust, daz er alle sein natur vergeuzet'), or another homily, where Eckhart, DW II *Pr.* 59, 627,10f., talks about God 'having all his lust in the birth, that is why he gives birth to his son in us' ('Got hât allen sînen lust in der geburt, und dar umbe gebirt er sînen sun in uns'); see also DW II *Pr.* 43, 320,2; 'lust' as a characterisation of man's and God's intellect is already important in Albertus Magnus, and goes certainly back to Aristotle's idea of 'his energy that is lust' (Aristotle, *Met.* A 7, 1072b 16), see Ph. Merlan, *Aristoteles, Averroës und die beiden Eckharts* (1955), 544; B. Thomassen, *Albertus Magnus und die geistigen Grundlagen der mittelalterlichen Universität* (1989) 42f.

[but] more so'.<sup>413</sup> Indeed, although God's love is common, it is the *commonness* and *commonality* of it that makes possible all things. His love is all life; so this love is procreative, fertile and active – a life-giving force – which holds the entire universe together; and when humans are caught up in this divine embrace, the ecstasy and joy of life, akin to an intense sexual encounter that generates an orgasmic experience and saturates the whole being of the lover and the loved. It is from this encounter that is created the possibility and actuality of fruitfulness.

Yes, the language of eroticism may inform this love, but this is human language and as such this language seems to be too trivial and to distort God's love. However, Eckhart is not taking language to the heights of the purely abstract, the glass palaces of scholarship – the *Schule* – but combines scholastic 'isms' with almost vulgar images, using language and figures of speech to give us not only a mental insight, but a visible sense of what God's love is.

This tension between how we usually conceive love in theology as exalted 'caritas', and how that love should remain 'uncommon' is resolved by Eckhart turning God's love in a public utility where paradoxically the commonness of God's love becomes the preciousness of His love: that is, a love that is freely 'doled' out to all who will accept it, in as much as the sun spreads its rays on all without discrimination and without a price. These rays do not only enlighten and enliven us; they touch us, they stroke us, they warm us, until if we are not careful they could consume us.

Ironically, the more a thing is common, the more precious that thing is in God's economics, and this paradox (commonness = preciousness) is contrary to the laws of supply-and-demand found in *homo-nomics*. For in God's *theo-nomics* his most common thing, His love is, is His most precious thing.

The sexual imageries that emerge from Eckhart's understanding that God is love are gleaned from the following statement: 'Every creature is something finite, limited, distinct and proper, and thus it is already not love. God with his total self is a common

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<sup>413</sup> LW IV 51,53ff. "Deus caritas est", primo, quia caritas communis est, nullum excludens. Ex qua communitate nota duo. Primo, quod deus communis est: omne ens et omne omnium esse ipse est, "in ipso, per ipsum et ab ipso". Sed nota quod deus est omne quod cogitari potest melius aut desiderari a quocumque et ab omnibus et adhuc amplius' (My own transl.): 'God is love' first because love is common to all, excluding no one.... First, God is common: He is every being and the whole existence of all things, 'In him, through him, and from him'. God is all the best that can be thought or desired by each and every person – and more so!').

love'.<sup>414</sup> This statement implies that, union, love and intimacy between persons or entities – God and creatures – if separate, distinct, plural or proper are not possible. 'Proper' here can be understood to be like a fraction, e.g.  $2 \div 2$  (two divided by 2). This is a division which can be further reduced to its lowest number which is 1 (one). So it is then with love, that for it to take place between God and the soul, there has to be no divisions; love has to be reduced to its bare nature, to go beyond number and become simplicity, oneness and unity. This unity then is only 'proper' when the relationship is utterly simple, undivided, and common.

Common love means a general and universal love, wild, unrestrained and abandoned – like that of a *harlot's* love – a love that is available to all. Another statement that encapsulates love for Eckhart's is: 'God is and said to be love principally because he is the one whom everything that can love, loves and seeks'.<sup>415</sup>

Now, God love borders on a kind of Aristotelian 'excess of love'<sup>416</sup> in that God seeks to love and can only love everything and everyone simultaneously without distinction or exception. As such, God's love runs the whole length of the sensual, erotic, philial, and agapal love spectrum. God loves everything. His love is insatiably voluptuous and this is why Eckhart says: 'It is he in whom everything that is unpleasant, contrary, sad, or non-existent is sweet and beautiful. Without him, anything pleasant is disagreeable and non-existent'.<sup>417</sup>

So God's love is unlike human love which only loves the pleasant, the beautiful, and which disdains the unlovely and the unlovable. God's love is the opposite of human love for he loves the unloved and the unlovable. However, that which is humanly pleasant and agreeable is disagreeable and non-existent to God. Why? Because God's nature is pure love, for according to Eckhart, he is 'totally lovable and totally love'.<sup>418</sup>

Now for one to really love another, one has to firstly love oneself. So it is with God; because, he loves himself he loves us. But God's love unlike Aristotle's love – the

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<sup>414</sup> LW IV 52 ff.: 'Omnis autem creatura finitum quoddam, limitatum, distinctum et proprium est, et sic iam non caritas est; deus autem se toto communis caritas est'.

<sup>415</sup> LW IV 53 ff.: "deus caritas est" et dicitur pro tanto, quia ipse est, quem amat et quaerit omne, quod a mare potest'.

<sup>416</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 9, Cap. 10 '... This is why one cannot love several people; love is ideally a sort of excess of friendship, and that can only be felt towards one person ...'.

<sup>417</sup> LW IV 53, 54 ff.: 'Rursus ipse est, in quo quaevis amara, contraria, tristia, non entia sunt dulcia, sunt pulchra, sunt, et sine quo quaevis iucunda sunt amara et nihil...'.

<sup>418</sup> Op. cit.

latter's love is measured out proportionally with love based on utilitarian relationship, reciprocity, variability or changeability – God's love in contrast is without a 'why'. God's love is unconditional. It is without division, without mediation; for it is the very same love with which he loves himself. For as Eckhart observes, God 'loves us with the very same love by which he loves and cherishes himself, his coeternal Son and the Holy Spirit'.<sup>419</sup>

God gives himself out of the richness of himself; that is God is constrained or governed by the dictum 'noblesse oblige' (nobility obliges). So God in a manner, that becomes his lordly status, his loving, automatically flows from his hereditary nature and legendary reputation as the ultimate romancer. God thus gives himself out of his own storehouse of wealth, and not from any gifts that humans can offer him. He does not ration his love towards us, no more than the oxygen in the air rations itself to a healthy set of lungs; nor does the sun begrudgingly 'doles' out its rays on those bathed in his energies. So likewise, God without thinking, without prejudice or biases, without hesitation, without partiality bestows his love on all as far as Eckhart is concerned.

Eckhart summarises *Sermon IV*<sup>420</sup> about God's love this way:<sup>421</sup>

1. Do not thank God because he loves us – he must do. But thank God, because he is good, that he must love.
2. Because the soul itself is 'the noble substance', and because it too is possessed by God and pre-contained in God, God has to love the soul – for it is him, or a part of him.
3. Consequently, the soul is within God and God within the soul; and because of this immanence or indwelling, God has no choice but to love the soul as he loves himself. For likeness attracts or adheres to likeness.

Now what is Eckhart claiming in the three foregoing statements? He is saying that God *must* love us because that is his nature to love. God even loves his enemies. God loves us because of the soul, which is his noble substance. It is God's. So God

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<sup>419</sup> LW IV 53,55 ff.: '... eodem et pari amore, quo se ipsum, filium suum coaeternum et spiritum sanctum diligit sive amat, nos amat'.

<sup>420</sup> LW IV 50 'Deus caritas est' etc., Ioh. 4.8; LW IV 56: 'Iuxta praemissa nota tria. Primo, quod non oportet deo regratiari quod nos amat. Necessitas enim illi incumbit. Sed regratior quod sic bonus est, ut ipsi sit necesse amare Secundo nota quod sit nobilis substantia anima ipsa, quam sic amat deus, habens et in se prae habens omnia. Tertio, quod sit intima deo an ima et deus animae, quam sic amat, qui nihil extra se amat nec dissimile aut alienum amat'.

<sup>421</sup> See F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), No. 56, 213.

loves himself in as much as a person loves him or herself. Hardly does a person hate him or herself; and if they did, then he or she would go to extraordinary lengths to rectify the situation by even resorting to cosmetic enhancement procedures to make themselves loved and lovable. God is the same way. That is why according to Eckhart God ‘adorns and decorates himself so as to make himself attractive to the soul’.<sup>422</sup>

God is single-minded, He is *myopic*, *possessive* and *obsessive* even *chauvinistic*, because for Eckhart, ‘God loves nothing outside himself; nothing unlike or different from himself does he love’. God is therefore an *exclusivist* and a *particularist* and He obstinately focuses on a relationship with the soul. He is like those lovers who are so passionately in love that they are prepared to defy family and societal norms; and despite the private and public disapprovals of their romance, they are prepared to risk all for the person they love.

Such then is the intensity of God’s love for his creatures, the intensity of which might be inadequately lyricised in love ballads, or in love affairs acted out in dramatic and tragic plays both in secular and religious literature. God’s love is total and absolute. It is a love for which He is prepared to lay down his life – re. the *Crucifixion* drama – for the one whom He loves – the soul.

In other sermons much in keeping with *Sermon VI*, we also see in those sermons God’s love on display. In *Sermon 103* for instance, God is described as a ‘hunter’ and a ‘fisherman’s hook’. ‘God lies in wait’ says Eckhart ‘for us with nothing so much as with love. For love resembles the fisherman’s hook. The fisherman cannot get the fish till it is caught on the hook. Once it takes the hook, he is sure of the fish; twist and turn as it may ... he is assured of his catch’.<sup>423</sup> Eckhart further adds: ‘He who is caught by it

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<sup>422</sup> DW II *Pr.* 41: ‘God is so decorated and offers Himself to the soul, and assiduously with all his divinity, makes himself pleasing to the soul, because He wants to be liked by the soul, and so he will have no rival. God does not tolerate any restriction; He also does not want us to strive for or desire anything else besides himself’ (My transl.). Josef Quint, 687:274.2-7. See also M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 5-6.

<sup>423</sup> DW IV/1 *Pr.* 103: ‘Dar umbe enlâget got keinem dinge sô sêre an uns als der minne. Wan ez ist rehte mit der minne als mit dem angele des vischers. Der visch enmac im niht werden, er enhafte denne an dem angele. Wenne er den angel gevâhet, sô ist der vischer des visches sicher; war sich joch der visch hin oder her kêret, sô ist sîn doch der vischer sicher’. Georg Steer (2003) 491-92.156-166.



has the strongest of bonds, and yet a pleasant burden .... Nothing brings you closest to God or makes God so much your own as the sweet bond of love'.<sup>424</sup>

Likewise in *Sermon 65* love is shown to be so potent that it forms the basis of God's existence. Eckhart uses the analogy of a *painted wall* (*Die Farbe an der Wand*) to show how love is the foundation of everything. 'Divine love takes us to itself', declares Eckhart, 'and we are one with it as much as the paint on the wall which is maintained by the wall would cease to exist if the wall were removed. So it is that all creatures are maintained in existence by love which is God'.<sup>425</sup>

Eckhart waxes so eloquently about God's love that one cannot fail to be moved by the torrent of superlatives about God's love. He further states that:

'Whatever God ever made or shall yet make – if God were to give all that entirely to my soul and God with, it would not satisfy my soul; I should not be happy'. And he further adds, 'if I'm happy then all things are in me, and God. Where I am, there God is; and then I am in God and where God is, there I am'.<sup>426</sup>

So love then is about unity or oneness. 'For if two is to become one, one of them', says Eckhart, 'must lose its being. So it is: and if God and your soul are to become one, your soul must lose her being and her life'.<sup>427</sup>

Such love allusions undergirding Eckhart's love prose, the notions of oneness, happiness, joy, peace, loveableness, blessedness and so forth are metaphors for a kind of erotic and even secret relationship that exists between God and the soul. And Eckhart alludes to this secret love-affair by saying that: 'For when God performs this work in the innermost part of the soul so secretly that neither angels or saints know of it, and the soul herself can do nothing but suffer it to happen'.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> 'Alsô spriche ich von der minne: wer von ir wirt gevangen, der hât daz allersterkeste bant und doch eine süeze bürde. Kein dinc enmachet dich gote nceher und got dir alsô eigen als diz süeze bant der minne'. Op. cit., transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 46.

<sup>425</sup> DW III *Pr.* 65, J. Quint 522.98.5-9, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 50.

<sup>426</sup> DW III *Pr.* 65, J. Quint (1976), 522 .100.11-12, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 51.

<sup>427</sup> *Pr.* 65 'Wo immer zwei eins werden sollen, da muß eines sein Sein verlieren. Ebenso ist's, wenn Gott und die Seele *eins* werden sollen, so muß die Seele ihr Sein und ihr Leben verlieren'. Ibid. [para. 2], 523.102. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 52.

<sup>428</sup> DW II *Pr.* 31 (Quint, 1971), 659.118.4-8, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 32.

Further to our discussion of love in reference to *Predigt* 27, Eckhart also says: ‘So your love should be one, for love can only be where there is equality and unity’.<sup>429</sup> He goes on to say that: ‘A woman and a man are unlike, but in love they are alike’.<sup>430</sup> So oneness is the key here, for when ‘one is not the other, for the *not* that makes the difference is nothing but bitterness, because there is no peace ....’<sup>431</sup>. ‘Two things [divided] cannot co-exist, so for there to be oneness, one of the two must lose its being’.<sup>432</sup> So the more one gives oneself to God, the more God gives Himself to you in return – the greater one’s eternal bliss is says Eckhart.<sup>433</sup>

The sexual imageries that we have observed in the sermons under review including Latin *Sermo* VI, all tell of love. However, this love although presented as divine love has all the hallmarks of erotic and sexual love, especially when expressions dealing with ‘hunter’, ‘fisherman’s hook’, ‘God parading or dressing Himself up for the soul’, a ‘woman and man becoming alike when they are no longer two but one’ are used. These together with those that display a wide range of emotions like joy, bliss, happiness and so forth; are all suggestive of an erotic encounter between passionate lovers. But in Eckhart’s case, the lovers are God and the soul.

So these are some of the sexual imageries that emerge for instance from *Sermon* VI, and as we continue to examine the language of some of Eckhart’s other homilies, we will see that many other sexual imageries under the motifs of unity, oneness, indistinction, commonness, desire, delight, pleasure, existence, ecstasy, passion, surrender, giving oneself totally and absolutely, ennoblement, possession, romance, and *caritas* be-speak God’s love. These motifs together with other imageries of a sensory nature dealing with food and drink, touch, taste, and so forth, all are laden with sexual meanings.

Eckhart in *Homily* 65 echoing St. John’s Gospel declaration: ‘Deus charitas est et qui manet in charitate in Deo manet et Deus in Eo...’,<sup>434</sup> compresses divinity into a simple prepositional phrase consisting of three basic relational components: subject,

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<sup>429</sup> DW II *Pr.* 27 (Quint, 646.47.7-8), transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 105.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid. 48.1-1.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid. 48.5-6.

<sup>432</sup> DW II *Pr.* 27. Ibid. 49.1-2, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 106.

<sup>433</sup> DW II *Pr.* 27. Ibid. 54.2-4, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 108.

<sup>434</sup> DW III *Pr.* 65, 521.95, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 49-53.

predicate and object, 'God is love'. So Eckhart answers one of the most baffling questions of human existence: What is or who is God? What is this God? Eckhart affirms St. John's axiomatic expression, and declares 'God is'. However, as to what this 'is-ness' is – or what is the nature of God, Eckhart's asserts that this 'is-ness' is Love. This theme of love is a continuous refrain in Eckhart's works and a continuing explication of the topic is necessary.

## 5.9 God is active

The theme of love in *Sermo* 65 although couched in a less scholastic style than is the style of Latin *Sermon* VI (this is because *Sermo* 65 is intended for Eckhart's average German hearers), nonetheless, *Sermo* 65 contains an abundance of sexual imageries. At the outset, we find that Eckhart starts with a series of propositions that contain very active phrases and words. I will transliterate and summarise the four reasons that Eckhart gives for God's love, and I will also *italicised* those active words. 'God is love'<sup>435</sup> because:-

1. He *chases* or *hunts* all that can *love* or *is capable of loving* and *compels* with His love *to be loved* (Da er alles das *jagt* was *lieben* kann und was Liebe *aufzubringen* vermag, so *jagt* er dies <alles> mit seiner Liebe dazu, ihn zu *lieben*).
2. He *loves* everything that He *has created* and *loves* that which is capable of loving; his creation by its love, *compels* Him to *love* whether it is sweet or sorrowful. (... daß alles das, was Gott je *erschuf* und was zur Liebe *befähigt ist*, ihn durch seine Liebe *jagt*, es zu *lieben*, sei's ihm lieb oder leid).
3. With His love he *drives* out separation or multiplicity out of everything that *can love* and *brings* them into oneness. ('... weil er mit seiner Liebe alles das, was *lieben* kann, aus aller Mannigfaltigkeit *treibt*').
4. Inasmuch as he *gives* to all creatures their being through his love, He *maintains* them and *receives* from them His love. ('... insofern als er mit seiner Liebe allen Kreaturen ihr Sein und ihr Leben *schenkt* und sie mit seiner Liebe *erhält*).'

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<sup>435</sup> DW III Pr.65, J. Quint 521.95.4-13.

Eckhart reduces complex and complicated propositions to simple formulas of *oneness* or *unity*. So God drives out all images, all dissimilarities, and all unlikenesses from His creation and reshapes them to be like himself so that He can love them. Furthermore, Eckhart solves the ‘riddle’ of what God is by this conditional thesis: ‘Should’, he declares, ‘anyone ask what God is, this is what I should say: that God is love, and in fact so loveable that all creatures seek to love His loveableness, whether they know it or not, or whether they wish to or not’.<sup>436</sup> This man then is an unabashed *romantic* who does not conceal his religious and theological convictions.

At face value, this type of Eckhartian love seems to be about *caritas* and indeed love for Eckhart is ultimately about those things – *caritas*. But the active expressions that we alluded to above, like, *compels*, *drives* and other such terms of compunction like *can* and *must*, all suggest that love is not only *caritas*, but it is also a *laissez faire* relationship. That is, it is based on freedom – with very little restrictions and regulations – and its main rule, is ‘let it be’. In practice then, this is a love that is propelled by passion, lust, ecstasy, by some *daemon* – by Eros. That is why, God *has* to love us whether he ‘wants to or not’, and, that is why we have to automatically love Him back in return according to Eckhart. That is the nature of God’s love. He can do no other, but love. God’s love is of *necessity* and it is sensually and erotically urgent and demanding.

In short, God is totally surrendered to the soul and *besotted* by love. His love is that of the daydreams of a lover for his or her beloved. This love drives him out of his solitary intellectual being and throws him into the sensuality of His creation. Love makes him making love and giving birth to creation. Eckhart’s conception of God’s love is far beyond any formal or informal courtly conception of love that is acted out by the troubadours of the medieval courts for their ladies. Because, Eckhart’s view of God’s love is not romanticised and idealised, it is radicalised and direct; it is not unrequited love. God’s love is not sung from outside the castle to touch the ear of a beloved lady beyond reach, but it is drastically consummated in an orgiastic encounter with the soul and characterised as the ‘Birth of the Son in the Soul’.

Furthermore, Eckhart’s conception of God’s love for the soul unlike that of courtly love is not necessarily an illicit and secretive affair. God’s love of the soul is not

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid.521. 96. 1-5.

necessarily chaste and unconsummated as the knights' loves for the noble ladies of court were supposed to be. No, rather, God's love for the soul is public or *tabloid* knowledge; it is a display – therefore it has an aura of the vulgar about it – it is a showcasing of how to go about it, sowing his seed, and reaping the fruits thereof. Unlike courtly love of the knights and the courtly ladies, the soul is not expected to perform any heroic and valorous deeds to please his or her beloved. These codes of chivalrous practices are not expected by God for the soul. In fact, it is quite the contrary, for the soul *has to be nothing*; *has to do nothing*, but only to be receptive to God by being stripped, bare and naked of all forms and images according to Eckhart.

Eckhart's love sermons are therefore not only a Neo-Platonic exhortation on one hand, for the soul to engage in an erotic and passionate love with the divine; but, on the other hand, his love homilies are encomia to strive to attain the *caritas* of St John's Gospel. However, ultimately Eckhart's love theme synthesises the Neo-Platonic and Christian love imageries, and they direct us to apprehend and to contemplate the image of the Divine One in all His and Her wisdom, beauty, goodness, happiness and truth. It is the language of ecstasy, in which the soul is to be possessed by the spirit, or in Eckhartian language, for the *Son to be born in the soul*. However, still for all the implied associations between God's love and the Platonic ideal forms – ideal forms encapsulated in Plato's Symposium:<sup>437</sup> – such a Platonic conception of love is too stylised and sterile for Eckhart. For him love is dynamic, creative, active, and it engages the cosmos.

Love is God, and God is Love – both are irremovable and inseparable. Furthermore, Eckhart does not see God's love as merely abstracted, idealised, intellectualised or philosophised. God's love is not attained or enjoyed by Socratic arguments or by Gnostic initiation ceremonies. The divine love that Eckhart speaks about is a love attained by practice, by action, and by a life that is exemplified, for instance, by Martha – i.e., a life of involvement in real or daily activities. God's love is active, fertile and procreative in Himself, in the soul, in creatures and in the world at

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<sup>437</sup> Plato's Symposium (210a - 212c). A discussion between a cast of characters including Phaedrus, Agathon and Socrates and others where each character expostulates by claiming and disclaiming the nature of love, with Socrates citing a woman called Diotima defining love amongst other things, 'a wondrous beauty ... which is... everlasting, not growing and decaying or waxing and waning...' that this beauty is to be contemplated.

large. His love is accessible and discoverable at the points where the soul and God meets. This conjunction is at the Incarnation. God's love is both an interior condition and an exterior activity.

### 5.10 God's life

God is love for Eckhart in such a way, that God's life depends on loving the soul; and, paraphrasing him, he says: 'God loves my soul so much that His life and Being depend on His Loving me.... To stop God loving my soul would be to deprive Him of His Godhead, for God is truly love.'<sup>438</sup> Everything depends on God's love according to Eckhart for just as the colour on the wall, as had been stated before, has no independent existence – it is maintained by the wall – so it is with the soul and all creation: that without God all would lose their existence were they to be deprived of love, which is God'.<sup>439</sup>

Now again when Eckhart further avers in *Homily 65*<sup>440</sup> that 'where two are to become one, one of them must lose its being. So it is: and if God and your soul are to become one, your soul must lose her being and her life'.<sup>441</sup> Here in this metaphor we have a sexual imagery, for just as it is amongst some creatures that they sacrifice their lives or have their lives sacrificed in their mating rituals (e.g., many species of praying mantis do this; and, for that matter, carnivores in order to live have to consume others or be consumed by others); so, this graphic, if somewhat shocking observation applies to the relationship between God and the soul; for, as Eckhart observes: 'So it is [it's an iron law of life so to speak, that ] 'if God and your soul are to become one, your soul must lose her being and her life'.<sup>442</sup>

The sexual symbolism of this metaphor is here evident, and it is about for instance, procreative, regenerative, and the dying-for-living principles. It is about the kenotic act of God: the archetypal sacrificial acts that range from the Golgotha story (The Crucifixion) to the tomb of Unknown Soldier; from the buried and germinating

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<sup>438</sup> DW III *Pr.* 65, J. Quint (1976) 521.97.7-10. See also M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 50.

<sup>439</sup> DW III *Pr.* 65, 522.98.6-9.

<sup>440</sup> As he does in *Homily DW II Pr.* 27, 646.49.1.

<sup>441</sup> DW III *Pr.* 65, J. Quint 523.101.17-19, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 52.

<sup>442</sup> Op. cit.

seed in the ground which in time brings forth fruit, to a type of Poretian *anéantissement* where Porete's soul has only one desire, and that is to be totally consumed by Love, to sink into *nothingness* and then to arise like a phoenix from the ashes after the soul's immolation into the flames of Love.

Love or God, and its divine union with the soul are akin to a sexual act; it is a total giving and receiving. It is pleasure and pain, loss and gain. Such are the dialectics of God's love for the soul where His energy is dissipated in the soul, yet the soul does not conserve this energy, but returns it to the divine in the form of revivifying fruits. God for Eckhart, because He is love, plants His seed in the *womb* or the soul, and the soul yields off-springs that make both the paternal and maternal progenitors equally radiant with joy.

The sexual imageries contained in *Sermon 65* as well as other imageries in other Eckhart's homilies take form in metaphoric expressions like *Ground* – God's ground. This is the *abyss*, the *desert*, the *spark*, the *intellect*, etc. Here in this ground, life is abundant and is generated in the divine amniotic fluids where the soul becomes pregnant with the divine image and nourishes the Image.

Continuing the subject of love and the sexual imageries that may be deduced from Eckhart's exposition on love, we will examine *Homily 27*.<sup>443</sup> Eckhart commences this homily by citing three verses<sup>444</sup> from John 15:12, 15, 16. They are as follows:

1. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you' (*hoc est praeceptum meum ut diligatis invicem sicut dilexi vos*).
2. 'But I have called you friends, because all things, whatsoever I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you' (*autem dixi amicos quia omnia quaecumque audivi a Patre meo nota feci vobis*).
3. 'But I have chosen you; and have appointed you, that you should go and should bring forth fruit; and your fruit should remain' (*sed ego elegi vos et posui vos ut eatis et fructum adferatis et fructus vester maneat*).

In fact these three quotes of his sits neatly in the categories of:

- (a) Caritas (φιλανθρωπία, philanthropia) or divine love (αγάπη, agape)
- (b) Philia (φιλία, friendship)

<sup>443</sup> DW II, 645.40.1-6, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 103.

<sup>444</sup> Op. cit.

(c) Amor (ἔρος, [eros, ἐρωτας] romantic love)

Each of the letters (a to c) corresponds with its numerical value (1-3 of the commandments). So with (a) the commandment to love, says Eckhart, means that ‘love is so pure, so destitute, so detached in itself’.<sup>445</sup> This type of love suggests caritas or agape. Such it is, that it is blissful, pleasant, good, virtuous and sweet. This type of ‘Love is nothing other than God’.<sup>446</sup>

It seems that no explicit or implicit sexual imageries are contained in this type of divine love. But such a conclusion may be erroneous, for a further examination of this love theme reveals appetitive or sensual feelings that are never far from the surface of caritas. How? Because, agape or caritas being juxtaposed against physical sensations, desires, and needs like thirst, hunger, drink, food, sweetness, and bliss strongly suggests that these appetitive feelings cannot be divorced from affections for the divine.

Eckhart’s additional comments seem to support this view, for he continues: ‘When I am thirsty, the drink commands me; when I am hungry, the food commands me. And so does God.’<sup>447</sup> What does that phrase mean: ‘And so does God?’ Eckhart answers the question: ‘He commands me to *relaxation* (*Wohltuendes*) that the whole world cannot equal’.<sup>448</sup> This last phrase is very telling, for it seems like a sexual reference to something.

What might this be? Eckhart tells us [that] ‘yes, if a man has once tasted this sweetness, then he can no more turn away with his love from goodness and from God’.<sup>449</sup> The use of words like *relaxation* and *sweetness* suggest intensely pleasurable sensations between lovers, entranced or enrapt as they might be in a sexual union. Likewise, this very physical eroticism is a metaphor for the *amplex divinus* of God and the soul in the minds of those who seek to transform eros into caritas. But for Eckhart this seems an especially tortuous transition, for in his theology of sexuality he hardly sees a divide between the sacred and the non-sacred spaces.

(b) Philia (φιλία, friendship)

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<sup>445</sup> DW II *Pr.* 27, 645.41.4.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid. 42.3-43.1.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid. 64544.8-9. Ibid. 104.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid. 645.9-45.1.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid. 645/6.45.1-3.



Philia is friendship of a kind that is brotherly, sisterly and neighbourly. Eckhart commends and recommends this love to us, and queries: ‘Would that not be a noble life, if every man were devoted to his neighbour’s peace as well as his own...?’<sup>450</sup> With this love though, he recognises that it has also to be ‘bare and pure and detached with its goal being nothing but goodness and God’.<sup>451</sup> For this to happen, this friendship or love has to be infused or suffused with *caritas* – divine love. If we are to have, or practice this type of friendship it has to be driven by motives that are pure. Such a love is so pure and absolute, that if it were performed just by one person, it would be as if all of humanity performed this deed.

Similarly, if the whole world were to perform this act of love, it would be as if one single person performed it. Likewise, one performance of the act of love by just one person would also be better for the whole world, and the whole world’s performance of that act of love would be better for that single individual because such a performance, whether done singly or corporately, because it was driven by a honourable intention would be greater than just the physical or actual performance of the act of kindness itself without the proper motive. Why? Because, such friendship or love is by nature so pure, so simple, so undivided and so untainted that it becomes the romantic cry: ‘One for all and all for one’ of the courageous Three Musketeers and the young nobleman D’Artagnan of Dumas’s Novel of the same title *Les Trois Mousquetaires*.<sup>452</sup>

Another way of expressing this love is this: Although one may actually give only one coin to charity, but one’s intention or desire were to give a million coins (if one had them), then this desire would count for more than the actual giving of that one coin. So in theory, because, intention is more important than act; the giver, although not possessing one million coins, would have as it were given them, because he or she had the desire to do so.

However, the opposite is also true. That is, if the motive for giving a million coins were less than honourable, then giving the smaller coinage would have been a more worthy act to perform than giving the million coins. Why? Because the motive

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<sup>450</sup> DW II *Pr.* 27, J. Quint, 646.45.6-10, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 104.

<sup>451</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>452</sup> Although outnumbered, D’Artagnan, Athos, Porthos and Aramis in a spirit of camaraderie bands together to fight the Cardinal’s guards. Andre Dumas, transl. Malvina G. Vogel (New York, 1977).

behind giving the smaller coinage was more pure than the motive behind giving the larger amount of money. So it is not charity or friendship *per se* that is important; rather, it is the motive behind the act of charity that is the most important thing. This is why Eckhart reminds us that: ‘Love has to be done without a Why’.<sup>453</sup> It must have no ulterior motives. So in *Sermon 5(b)* he says: ‘If a man ever peeped into the ground just only for a moment, a thousand marks of red embossed gold are the same as a brass farthing. So for this reason, you should act from your innermost, and do all your work without Why’.<sup>454</sup>

He further admonishes that mere works, devotion, ecstasies, etc., although they are good, are not sufficient in themselves to obtain the best spiritual results if they do not come from the ground. That such works are for outward show and such pietistic actions are ‘nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak around His head and shoving Him under a bench’.<sup>455</sup>

Love is such an important thing for Eckhart, in summary he says: ‘Love gets us closer to God than penitence and ascetic practices. Love is a bridle; love is like a fisherman’s hook. Nothing brings you closer to God or makes God so much your own as the sweet bond of love’.<sup>456</sup>

Are there any sexual imageries hidden in this type of love or friendship on which Eckhart preaches? For just as there exists in *philia* certain physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual relationships such as bonding, trust, respect, honour, compassion, intimacy, caring, sharing, tenderness, togetherness, peaceableness, and so forth, these same affective states must also exist in sexual relationships, if such relationships are to succeed. But more importantly, such sexual affections must go purely beyond the physical realm and into the realm of transcendence, a psychic state, a state of oneness and unity, a state that Eckhart time and time again refers to. This state Eckhart describes as virtuous, where even when we are wronged, we forgive those who

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<sup>453</sup> DW II *Pr.* 28, 649.50.7-8, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 141.

<sup>454</sup> DW I *Pr.* 5(b), transl. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 117.

<sup>455</sup> DW I *Pr.* 5(B), 50 para. 3. [lms.16-17], transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 117.

<sup>456</sup> DW IV/1 *Pr.* 103 [MHG] 490-491.150-155, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 46.

wrong us. For he says: ‘That is how we should be serious about our practice of virtue’.<sup>457</sup>

In this type of relationship, if there is to be oneness, then two dissimilar things cannot co-exists. Friendship and love also flourish in the Trinity – between Father, Son and Holy Spirit – for God’s Son according to Eckhart is not only son by filial relationship, but he is God also. Why? Because God has entrusted his Son with everything He has, and all that He owns, including His (God’s) very own nature.

Similarly, the bond between the Father and the Son is lubricated by the *oil* of the Holy Spirit. Eckhart let it be known that God has given His own Son not only the fruits of the tree – i.e. procreative powers – but given Him also the tree itself; and moreover, the very roots of the tree.<sup>458</sup> That is His ground, so that the Son can bear fruits and will always bear fruits. So this fruit-bearing metaphor is applicable to the soul and those to whom John 15 is addressed: that they should bear fruits, and that their fruits should remain. Fruits are a metaphor for all kinds of productive activity in the soul, and this productive activity applies both to humanity and divinity.

Finally, (c), *Eros*, *Amor* or Romantic Love: Eckhart’s *Sermon 5* exhorts us to bear fruits and this injunction naturally follows from point (b), under *philia*. Here in (c), we have an erotic or romantic kind of love between the soul and the divine – between friends. Now (c), is not an excuse or justification for certain types of conduct that might be viewed as illicit or detrimental to love and friendship. But this love I believe is a passionate desire to bear fruits. Again this fruit-bearing analogy is wide in scope, and it spans desire, passion and unrequited love for the fruits of justice, goodness, virtue, peace, charity, oneness, unity, simplicity, detachment; to suffer nobly if one has to suffer without a sense of hopelessness, and self-pity.<sup>459</sup>

The virtues of love which Eckhart speaks about are spoken of by the use of sexual imageries like fruits, nakedness, bareness, ground, union, core, flower, fountain, seed and other such sensually evocative terms. Eckhart’s love then is idealised but yet

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<sup>457</sup> DW II *Pr.* 27, 646.47.5-6, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 105.

<sup>458</sup> DW II *Pr.* 27, 647.52.7-8, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 107.

<sup>459</sup> DW I *Pr.* 5(a) Eckhart says: ‘If you want to take God properly, you should take Him equally in all things, in hardship as in comfort, in weeping as in joy, it should be all the same to you’. J. Quint, [para. 1, l. 3-5], 448, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 112.

practical and active; and, in the process it engages and invites the following three types of love: 1. Divine 2. Philial 3. Amorous.

To sum up then, it might be safe to say that this is Eckhart's thesis about Love. First, God is love, so love is *Divine*, and as such it is life that generates and contains all things. Second, love also speaks about a profound relationship between divinity and humanity, and also shows the need for there to be a necessary, and a desirable relationship between neighbours. Third, love extols and celebrates the dignity and importance of the individual.

## Chapter Six: God and the Soul's intimacy

### 6.1 Rise Up

A final discussion will explore the command: *Surge*, exploring *Predigt* 84:<sup>460</sup> *Puella surge*, 'Maiden Arise' (Luc. 8:54).

But he taking her by the hand, cried out, saying: 'Maid, arise'! (*ipse autem tenens manum eius clamavit dicens puella surge*). (*Vulgate*)

Eckhart takes this account of what Luke describes as an actual physical miracle where Jesus raises the daughter of a religious leader from the dead; but, Eckhart uses this story not so much as a supernaturalistic event, but as a metaphor for union with God. In Eckhart's explication of the story in *Predigt* 84, he says: 'With this single expression [*surge* – arise!] our Lord Jesus teaches us that the soul is to rise above all bodily things'.<sup>461</sup>

In Eckhart's interpretation of the event, the young maiden is the soul. She is feminine. She has to 'rise up' or 'stand up' or 'get up' for the purpose of becoming one with the Son. To do this, requires her to rise above *bodily* (*körperhaften*) things if she is to be enjoined with the Son. Now, *bodily* or corporeal things encompass many things, but they can all be subsumed under the heading of the *outerman vis-à-vis* the *innerman* or the *nobleman*. So from this angle, the young girl does not necessarily have to be someone who is sexually untouched, but she must like Mary and Martha simultaneously be a *virgin* and a *wife*;<sup>462</sup> that is to be both a contemplative and an active person; she or he in effect must be both detached from *alien images and as empty as he or she was before they existed*;<sup>463</sup> and, at the same time attached to the extent that she is actively engaged in the world, and trying to make it a more sustainable environment for all creation including the Son himself.

At the very outset of Eckhart's exegesis, we observe that the sexual connotations of the story are palpable. First, we have a young maiden, and this suggests 'virginity'. However, as I have already indicated, this virginity has to be turned into fertility and

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<sup>460</sup> DW III, J. Quint, 587ff.

<sup>461</sup> DW III, J. Quint, 587.454.1-2.

<sup>462</sup> DW I *Pr.* 2, [para. 1, lns.2-4], 434.

<sup>463</sup> DW I *Pr.* 2, J. Quint [para. 2.2-4], 434.

fruitfulness – by the act of the virgin ‘rising’. ‘Rising’ speaks about anticipation, excitement, desire, action, joy, bliss, and ultimately, consummation.

Now, all these feelings and activity will occur when the maiden – the soul – becomes one with the divine. This unity is brought about in ‘heat’ or passion, but mediated through the Holy Spirit according to Eckhart. For as *Predigt* 85 (another parallel and complimentary sermon on the same theme *Arise*) says, that the hand that touched the damsel is, ‘The Hand of God, that is the Holy Spirit. [That] all works are cast in heat’.<sup>464</sup>

In *Predigt* 84, the Lord speaks to the young maiden and implores her to ‘Arise’. This suggests that the maiden was dormant and asleep. God is approaching her bed where she had been resting – alienated from her true God-given nature; perhaps, even rebellious against her family as often-times some young people are prone to be. But the Lord comes as her counsellor or *resurrector* and demands that she must now get up, arise to a new life – to creativity and active engagement in life.

The maiden here is also reflective of the Virgin Mary herself who although she was a *virgin* had to become a responsible citizen so as to eventually become a mother to bear both literally and figuratively the Son of God in her womb. So virginity will remain sterility unless it stirs itself into fertility. It is only then when the soul makes herself available to be impregnated with the divine seed, can the Eckhartian transformative experience of *Birth of the Son in the Soul* take place.

Likewise, this story of the *resurrected* maiden parallels the stories of Mary and Martha, and Rachel and Leah, as discussed before; and to this extent, this story like the others is a metaphor for fruitfulness. Eckhart’s allegory is this: that a virgin, if she or he is to produce fruits cannot for too long remain a virgin as was for example, Rachel. (Strictly speaking she was not physically a virgin for she was married to Jacob, but she functioned like a virgin because she was infertile for a very long time).

So a virgin must become a mother or father even if not literally, certainly figuratively as were *parents* and *care-givers* like Martha (we are not told if she had any children, but she functioned as a ‘caregiver’), and Leah (she had children). As to the story about Martha, recall Eckhart’s reading of Luke’s text: ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ went

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<sup>464</sup> DW III 590.468.1-3.

up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife'.<sup>465</sup> So the Luke's maiden 'arise' narrative when given the Eckhartian treatment unites contemplation or mediation with action or practise; and, this blending of contemplation and action is achieved by the maid arising with energy and heat, and making herself available to the Son. Note here, the masculine gender Son or Lord is referred to; this indicate the nexus between sexuality and fertility.

The maiden arising is the soul that is raised up to God in union at her Lord's invitation. Rising up commences when the tender touch of his hand is placed upon her at her bedside, and when his cooing voice pleases her. There is here in this story, echoes of love-play or foreplay between the soul and the Son, as each lover makes himself and herself desirable and ready for the other. This demonstration of tenderness is portrayed in the *mating-ritual* in *Predigt* 85 whereas here, in this sermon, the soul without fanfare or without any introductory remark is commanded into action by this abrupt ejaculatory phrase, 'Arise!'<sup>466</sup> It is after that compelling command to the girl to 'Get up', that he places his hand on her. 'Then he rests his hand upon her and asks her to Arise'.<sup>467</sup>

The Lord placing – or putting, taking, leading – the maiden by the hand suggests several things. The hand symbolises many things in Scripture. It is symbolic of love, power, support, protection, submission, comfort, guidance, healing, and so forth. It also functions in very physical and practical ways; but in the context of our story where the Lord takes the young, resting maiden (or the soul for Eckhart) by the hand, the hand is suggestive of the Lord's power, love and compassion; but at the same time, the hand speaks to the submissive nature of the soul; that is, she is sufficiently willing and trusting for the Lord to take her by the hand and to lead her into a new and fruitful life.

For the soul to become a bride of the Lord's, she has to be willing to be taken by His hand. But by the same token, the bridegroom has to be sufficiently loving and gentle for the bride to trust him so that she is willing to join with him in a loving and fulfilling relationship. The Lord taking the maiden by the hand represents a picture of a nuptial agreement between a loving couple who are embarking on a life-transforming journey in an act of self-sacrifice and love. Such then is the meaning behind the account

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<sup>465</sup> DW I *Pr.*2, J. Quint [para. 1.2-4], 434.

<sup>466</sup> DW III 590.468.

<sup>467</sup> DW III 590.468.2.

of the Lord taking the *jungfrau* by the hand, which is: she is awakened to her full potential, and is willing to begin a new life of fruitfulness. This then gives the story a sexual salience.

We may ask, why must the soul arise? The soul must *rise up* from ‘corporeal’ (*körperhaften*)<sup>468</sup> or material things, etc.<sup>469</sup> Of course, these *bodily* things are not necessarily anything to do with the body *per se* – it is not about the Pauline/St. Augustine’s views about the body being impure and that it needs to be tamed and ultimately discarded in order to achieve spiritual perfection. Rather, the body are those assemblage of things – whether material, psychic, religious or even spiritual – to which the soul is enslaved or attached that prevent it from uniting with God.

At a general level, the soul rising up means that it has to go beyond mere appetitive desires, and that it has to aspire to the *intellective* realm, so as to be reflected in the image of God. This *rising up* command is also given by Jesus to a young man who had also been dead. ‘*Adolescens, tibi dico*’ – ‘Young man arise’, says Luke 7:14.<sup>470</sup> Eckhart remarks that this youth represents the highest intellect, and death is when the soul is in a state of imperfection. But the arising is when the higher mind awakes into understanding and cries to God for grace; that when the understanding gets the divine light, it becomes self-knowing and then it sees God. At a more specific level there are three things<sup>471</sup> according to Eckhart’s *Predigt* 85 which prevent the unity between the soul and God. These I will sum up:

1. She (the soul) is scattered and not a unitary whole
2. She is involved in temporal things
3. She is turned towards the body

Now, to redress this problem of disunity, three things correspondingly have to take place:

1. She has to be simple and undivided
2. She has to be dwelling above herself, above all transient things and adhering to God
3. She has to detach herself from all material things and work towards her primal purity

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<sup>468</sup> MHG term = *lîplichen*.

<sup>469</sup> *Predigt* 84, 587.454.2-3.

<sup>470</sup> DW I [para. 1.4-7], 499, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, 263.

<sup>471</sup> DW III *Pr.* 85, [para. 1.lns.1-5], 591, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 264.



The command to ‘arise’ and to dwell above oneself is a summon to attain knowledge, wisdom and love; and, all these qualities are to be found in God. However, *to arise* is an anthropological ascension or an elevation; it is a cognitive or intellectual leap of development. *To arise* is also a theological and cosmological summons. It is a command to assume divinity which is achievable when the soul and the divine fuses to become one.

‘To arise’ is an ontological elevation also. For although Eckhart says that the word ‘arise, is a single word’, he does not necessary mean that it denotes just a single or simple verbal expression like the counting number ‘1’. No, ‘arise’ connotes unity, singularity – not plurality – and on this single word *Arise*, rests the unity of the Godhead, and the unity of the soul in God. So *single* here as applied to the word ‘arise’, has a theological significance. *Single* is a metaphor also for detachment, letting-go of self, and divesting oneself of images in order to be united with God.

The grammatical singularity of the word *Arise*, importantly too means that the word *Arise* is analogically on par with the Word or Logos. So the Word or Logos is single – it is One. Logos signifies that the soul is also one, and just as Logos comes from the Father and remains in the Father, the soul that resides in the Father takes on the self-same characteristics of Logos. The soul is also one with God. Ontologically this single word ‘arise’ contains the meaning of all other words.

*Arise* contains *all things*. Eckhart plays on this word ‘arise’; to him it is the *in principio*. *Arise* is an action-oriented word. The word that describes *Word* is therefore a state of potentiality and actuality. The *Word* is an ontological construct which is used synonymously with *Arise*, and it contains all our thoughts, discloses Eckhart. He believes that the Word (Logos, *Arise*) comes from the heart therefore it is a mirror of Being and Substance. The Word is the *root* of all things. It is the looking glass into the soul, and through this looking glass the soul is reflected back to itself – as God. Eckhart proceeds to give four reasons in *Pr.* 84<sup>472</sup> for the soul to ‘arise’, and it is in these reasons that some very telling sexual imageries emerge. The soul should *arise* because of:

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<sup>472</sup> DW III *Pr.* 84, [Ins. 456-462], 587-588, transl. M.O.C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 257-260.

1. The many and various *joys* (*Beglückung*) that it finds in God. In other translations of Predigt 84, *Beglückung* is rendered *delights* or *happiness*. But although these words are satisfactory they do not capture the real meaning and feeling of what Eckhart meant; for, these words dilute the full import of what he means to convey. For the words *joy*, *happiness*, *pleasure*, *delights* although adequate at *face value* are not erotically nuanced as Eckhart would have the encounter between the soul and the Lord to be. His word for delight found in the MHG version of Predigt. 84 is *wollust*; and this term connotes *lust*, *voluptuousness*, *sensuality* or *lasciviousness*. For he says: ‘... *durch die manivaltige wollust, die si in gote vindet ...*’ (because of the manifold *sensuousness* it [the soul] finds in God).<sup>473</sup>

Because of the many voluptuous pleasures that the soul finds in God, all these pleasures cannot be contained in God’s perfection says Eckhart. Why then is God’s perfection such that these sensuous pleasures cannot be contained in Him? Perfection here is not necessarily about the usual technical or ontological descriptors for God, like *transcendence*, *intellect*, *omnipotence*, *wisdom* and so forth; neither is perfection necessarily about His moral or ethical attributes, like goodness, justice, and so forth. Perfection here means the fullness or plenitude of His creative and sexual potentialities, and His proclivity for sexual engagement.

These sexual desires are so intense that they cannot be contained within Him. He is in a constant state of sexual restlessness to procreate, so He seeks an active and a willing partner with whom He can co-habit. So He has created the soul with which He can have a timeless loving relationship in order to release His creative energies and to plant His seed. God’s creative power and His sexual prowess are so prodigious and absolute, that they become a *perfection*; and thus, it is from this superabundance or overflow of sexuality which cannot all be contained in Himself, that some of it gushes out enriching saturating and impregnating the soul.

We already have obtained clear signals from Eckhart what this *perfection* is, and this hint comes from Eckhart’s German *Homily* 4, titled: ‘*Omne datum optimum et donum perfectum desursum est*’ (‘Every good gift and perfect gift is from above’, James

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<sup>473</sup> DW III Pr. 84, 456.123.5: *manivaltige wollust*. This is the rendering in MGH which means *manifold lusts*. The modern translation uses *Beglückung*: joy, delight or some other word that although more linguistically elevated somehow mask the sensuous nature of the word *lust*.

1:17). But Eckhart writing in German makes the sentence to read: ‘The best gift of all and perfection descend from above from the Father of Lights’.<sup>474</sup> Because of this construction, the Latin qualifier *Omne* (all or everything) is abandoned, and we now get *allerbeste* (the best of all or best of). So by eliminating the qualifier ‘omne’, there are not any longer *many* gifts, but ‘the best gift’; ‘the *one* best gift’, which later we will see what it is.

The one best gift suggests a definite gift which is singular in nature. There are two distinct things here about this *one best gift*. It is (i) the best gift, and (ii) perfect or perfection.

The notion of *gift* and *perfection* that Eckhart speaks about has to do with the soul. For he adds: ‘The Father gives birth to the Son in the soul just as he does in his own nature’.<sup>475</sup> Eckhart characterises God as someone who always has sex on his mind. For hear what he says in answer to a question that was asked of him about how God spends His time: ‘I was once asked, what did the Father in heaven do? As I said, He gives birth to his son, and this doing it is so lustful (*so lustvoll*) that he likes it so well that he never does anything but give birth to his son, and from the both of them blooms the Holy Spirit’. Eckhart further adds. ‘Where the father gives birth to his son in me, there I am the same son and not another; we are probably different in the human condition, but there I am the same son and not another’.<sup>476</sup>

So here, the voluptuous nature of God shines through Eckhart’s homily and the gift which he speaks about is *sexuality* and the *perfection* is the soul. Both when conjoined results in birthing; and, birthing is always taking place, for as Eckhart further adds:

When God created all creatures, they were so insignificant and confining that he had no freedom to move in them. Then he made the soul so like himself and so similar in order to give himself to the soul because whatever else he could give her, it did not value it at all. God has to give himself to me as my own as he really is himself, or I have nothing and have no taste for anything. The person

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<sup>474</sup> DW I Pr.4. 442.1-2.

<sup>475</sup> DW I Pr. 4, [para. 4. lns.3-4], 444. transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 251.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.; DW I Pr. 4, [para. 4 lns. 7-12], 444-445. transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 251.

who is to receive him thus must have surrendered himself completely and have gone out of himself.<sup>477</sup>

So because the gift is the soul and the perfection that is spoken about is the fullness of the relationship that the soul has in God, and also by the fact that the soul and God becomes one when joined in union; therefore, the sensuous pleasures which constitute his Being or his essence have to be poured out; and they are poured out (a) as creatures and (b) poured out to be shared by his creatures. So God not only creates but he shares with creatures what he creates. For as Eckhart says: ‘God’s perfection cannot contain itself but lets pour forth from him creatures with whom he can share himself, who can receive his likeness’.<sup>478</sup> This phrase suggests that God is forever in a state of sexual excitement and wants to have release and in the process ‘replenish, regenerate, and multiply’ all of his creation.

God’s nature then is, his bubbling, boiling-over, effervescent self; and this ‘fissionable’ state of his, speaks of love, passion, joy, sensuality, lust, desire and sexual activity. Within and out of this organic vortex of the life of God, ‘immeasurable numbers flow out as though he were completely emptied’. For Eckhart then, God is so fecund, fertile and reproductive, that ‘there are more angels than pieces of gravel, or blades of grass or leaves’.<sup>479</sup> Just as varied and multitudinous as things are in God – both supernatural and natural – all these things are contained in God, and all these things flow from God and into the soul. Along with the joys that flow from God into the soul, there also flows ‘light, grace and gifts’, says Eckhart.

Such then are the bounties which the soul receives when it arises, and when it dwells above itself – unites with God; and, it is for these reasons that the soul must *rise up*. The modifier ‘up’ is an important operative word. It is not only necessary to *rise*, but one must *get up*, *stand up*. By being in an upright position enables the soul to look steadfastly into the ‘smiling face of God’.<sup>480</sup> This ‘getting up’ shows *equality* and oneness with God, and this act puts one on the same plane as it were with God. By

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<sup>477</sup> DW I *Pr.* 4, [para. 3, lns. 4-10], 444. Ibid. 250.

<sup>478</sup> DW III *Pr.* 84, [paras. 3, 4, lns. 2-5], 597, transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 335.

<sup>479</sup> DW III *Pr.* 84, [lms. 3-4], 587. 475, transl. McGinn, *Teacher & Preacher*, 335.

<sup>480</sup> Stage 2 of Eckhart’s 6 steps to union between soul and God. Although still dependent on his spiritual parents, the nobleman along his journey now goes on his own quest for God, and as he does so, he crawls further and further away from his mother’s lap in order to smile at his heavenly Father. See *Essential Sermons*, transl. E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons* (1981), 242.

*getting up*, one's vision and horizon is broadened, and now one sees God as He sees Himself. He sees Himself as the soul, and when the soul is united with God, she too becomes like God.<sup>481</sup>

There are also a number of other reasons, says Eckhart for the soul to *arise*. The second reason is that 'the soul finds purity (*Lauterkeit*) in God'.<sup>482</sup> This purity is in the *nakedness* of God. So the soul that comes to God, in God, finds God purely naked; and in order for the soul to be one with God, she too has to become *pure nakedness*. So this means, that lust and sex are not at odds with purity; spirituality does not have to be de-sexualised or *vice versa*.

So here in this private act of intimacy between God and the soul there are no longer any divisions or *differentness* between God and the soul, because when both are naked, locked or interlocked in deep embrace – in sameness – at that eternal moment, all cares and worries vanish; and, the soul now forgets about all temporal things and contemplates purity – which indicates that the soul also is beyond impurity, normally connected with sexuality.

Eckhart offers a re-interpretation not only of theology, but also of sexuality, as he harmonizes them to show that there is no rational, spiritual or moral divide between them.

In order for this rebirth, or raising-up of the soul to be accomplished, the soul has to stir herself from sleep and *arise*. *Arise* is a euphemism for sexual arousal and sexual receptivity. Likewise as the soul also represents the male, his vital organ cannot now be plagued by *penile erectile dysfunctions* – it also must arise! – so that 'God can flow into the soul, and that the soul can flow [flowing suggests movement, dynamism, and the interchange of fluids] into God'.<sup>483</sup> Furthermore, the soul has to die from anticipated joy before it strides into God says Eckhart. This striding into God consists of four steps:<sup>484</sup>

1. Fear, hope and desire

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<sup>481</sup> DW I Pr. 10, transl. M.O.C.Walsh, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 145, '...it is said that there is no greater union than that of God and the soul. When the soul receives a kiss from the Godhead, then she stands in absolute perfection and bliss... The soul is as noble as God himself is. God touches the soul like Himself'.

<sup>482</sup> DW III Pr. 84, 587.458.1-2.

<sup>483</sup> DW III Pr. 84. 588.464. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 336.

<sup>484</sup> DW III Pr. 84, transl. M.O.C.Walsh, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, 259-260.

2. Culmination of fear, fulfillment of hope and desire. These are accomplished at the climactic moment of intimacy
3. Bliss, forgetfulness, sleepiness, resolution of tensions – this is a forgetting of all temporal things according to Eckhart
4. Soul remaining in God forever in eternity. Here she never thinks of temporal things or thinks of herself. Rather she is completely dissolved<sup>485</sup> or melted in God and God in her.

These analogies at one level speak of physical death and passing or dissolving or melting into God which is an eschatological vision about the hereafter. But this dissolving or melting into God as imagined by Eckhart actually speaks about the acme of sexual experience, where at that moment of ecstasy, the soul is enraptured in God. It is a point where time ceases and the eternal moment takes over. It is at this juncture that all cares – all ‘bodily’ and temporal things – vanish, and it is a time when one catches a glimpse of timeless eternity.

It is a time of exultation and exhilaration when during that hypnotic orgiastic encounter, the soul experiences unspeakable joy in the divine. These moments of intensely passionate encounters are what Eckhart admonishes the soul ‘to stride and die here’ for. Paradoxically, this dying is actually a rebirth and an ‘arising’ when the entire person is physically, emotionally, psychically, biologically, spiritually renewed. This is when that virgin soul – as typified by the young maiden portrayed by Luke – awakes to participate and partake in the love, life, and joys of the Lord.

A third reason that Eckhart gives for the soul to arise is that she should do so in the ‘completeness’, oneness, unity, sameness that it now shares with God. So when the soul arises she becomes infused and imbued with wisdom and goodness, and it is these qualities that constitute the very essence of God.

In fact, these qualities of *goodness*, *wisdom*, *mercy* and *justice* mentioned by Eckhart are not merely adjectives that describe God, but these qualities are his proper substance – they comprise his essential nature. So the soul that arises in God now also takes on the nature of God. Eckhart believes that it is only when God is in the soul that

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<sup>485</sup> DW III *Pr.* 84, 465.3-5: ‘si ist vervlozen in gote und got in ir’; *Pr.* 84 589.465.3-4. transl.: ‘Rather it [she] is melted within God and God in it [her]’.

God can comprehend God, for as he explains: ‘There God comprehends God, and God fashions himself in the soul and forms it like himself’.<sup>486</sup>

The fourth reason for the soul to arise is this: That by doing so, it is without limits in God. It is always new in God; and it is beyond time in God. It is renewed or reborn everyday ‘as if it had never been born before’. This phrase ‘as if the soul had never been born before’ is a very powerful physical and sensual one. It is analogous to saying, ‘this is the greatest or best meal that I’ve ever eaten’. Such an expression is wildly exuberant and impossible to prove. But it is said or believed because the pleasure that is obtained from eating such a meal now is so intense.

The meal provides such pleasurable sensations which seems like they have never before been experienced. This kind of forgetfulness – this gastronomic amnesia – is the same experience that is implied by the term ‘as if the soul had never been born before’. Of course, this figure of speech about the *greatest* or *best* meal bears no resemblance to reality; it is a statement about the indescribable niceness of the food.

Likewise, with the term ‘the need to be born everyday’, is an expression that connotes a *sui generis* experience – i.e. the soul penetrating God. Such an experience feels so new as if it has never before been had. Clearly here, we hear echoes of an intense orgasmic exultation. Being born anew everyday is like eating and sleeping everyday; these activities are not only *necessaries*, but they are very existential life imperatives. We forgo them to our own detriment. It is no wonder then that Eckhart remarked that: ‘If fiery love grows cold in the soul she dies’.<sup>487</sup>

For the soul to remain alive it has to be hot with love for God. She (the soul), as Eckhart tells us, has got to be *divorced* from all things; she must be all alone as God is all alone.<sup>488</sup> This is of course not a call necessarily to sexual asceticism or sexual renunciation, but rather a call to give up the previous engagement, the soul’s marriage to this world, and an engagement which – according to canonical law – is non-existent, or at least not legally possible. The soul is asked to transcend the frames that God in his Church has set, she is asked to go beyond God’s own set limits and to enter into a total

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<sup>486</sup> DW III *Pr.* 84, 462.36-37: ‘Dâ begrîfet got und wûrket got sich selben in der sêle und bilder sie nâch im’.

<sup>487</sup> DW III *Pr.* 85, 590.468.3-5, transl. M.O.C.Walshe, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, vol. III, 263.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.* 468.5-7.

commitment, and into abandonment where she finds herself engaged in God. That is to say, that the soul is God's sole property, and she is reserved for His pleasure alone, outside the divine norm; and, that He alone, transcending his own boundaries, has the exclusive rights to the soul; and is the soul's only lover.

Eckhart's statement about the maid being entreated to rise, and his birth narrative about being born every day as if she had never been born before goes further than mere physical descriptions of soteriological truths. For his analogies couched in erotic language convey a metaphysical message which says that the soul in coming into contact with God experiences such a thrill, that it is a pleasure that is orgiastic in nature. For just as yesterday's delicious meal does not suffice or satisfy our present hunger for food, this analogy suggests that the satisfactions that the soul obtained from a previous erotic encounter with the divine is insufficient to satisfy today's yearning or today's need for intimacy with God.

Therefore, the soul like God has each day to be born anew and be beyond time'.<sup>489</sup> So in order for this rebirth, or raising-up of the soul to be accomplished, the soul has to stir herself from sleep and arise and become one with God. Eckhart uses theological and metaphysical language to speak about the intimacy between the divine and the soul; this language (mostly sublime but sometimes down-to-earth), nonetheless conceals, and at the time, exposes some very sexually explosive themes.

## 6.2 Outlook

This study of the sexual imageries in Meister Eckhart is far from being comprehensive, although it is hoped that the extent to which the topic has been discussed, has revealed a side of Eckhart that has hitherto rarely been seen and never separately explored. As said at the beginning of this study, Eckhart is a positive person. That is to say, Eckhart's theology has resonance and relevance for today, because humans it seems are full of despair as they become more and more mired in all kinds of problems – economic, political, social, religious – and what they perceive as imminent catastrophes. But instead of suggesting a withdrawal into an inner castle, a *worldless* realm of spirituality or intellect, Eckhart defies any sense of gloom and hopelessness

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<sup>489</sup> DW III, J. Quint, 588.453.1.



that pervade so much of humanity. Instead, he offers his philosophical theology of birth and renewal that promises a *renaissance* of spirit and *body* that encompasses gender, personality and sexuality. From this study of Eckhart we take away at least two very important things:

1. That divinity participates in full humanity, expressed in a sexuality that is primarily, divine lust, out of which creativity arises. Through this divine loving and longing, this world came to be, and God has no other wish for it, than to *be in bed* with humanity. Likewise, God wants humanity to ascend to him, and by the command, *Surge, Steh auf! etc.*<sup>490</sup> (arise, stand up, get-up, etc.), he exhorts the soul with more than a whispered hint as to what his real intentions are: His desire for intimacy.
2. That ‘all things are in God and God is in all things’. His frequent references to Roman 11:36, *quoniam ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso omnia ipsi gloria in saecula....* (Rom.11: 36) – ‘For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: To him be glory forever...’<sup>491</sup> reveal the intimate and loving relationship that exists between God and his cosmos, including the soul. Such a loving relationship is expressed also in terms of sexuality.

However, Eckhart consciously inverts bodily sexuality, and by doing so, he transcends self-oriented sexuality; and by liberating human beings from self-oriented sexuality which, even in the bodily realm is rarely satisfactory, but which still requires the need for the beloved other; he not only relieves people of their narcissistic sexual neuroses in which they are imprisoned – neuroses often perceived to be a search for the divine –; but, he gives them a real sense of sexuality, as he broadens this sexuality by directing it towards the Divine. This Divine, however, is so intimate to the Self, that love of God becomes both: love of the Self, of mind and body, and love for all others. This is a true self-love, as it is an encounter with one’s *innerst* self - Eckhart’s God.

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<sup>490</sup> LW IV, *Sermo* XXX11: ‘Surge, vade. Fides tua te salvum fecit’ (Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you). Luc. 17.19; ‘Et ait: adulescens, tibi dico, surge!’ (And he said: Young man I tell you to get up). Luc. 7:15; DW III *Predigt* 84, *Puella, surge* <Luc. 8,54>; 454.122.30. Also DW III *Predigt* 85, *Pvella, surge* <Luc. 8,54>; 468.1-2.

<sup>491</sup> “‘Ex ipso’ enim efficienter, ‘per ipsum’ formaliter, ‘in ipso’ finaliter est quod est et quod quid est.’ (‘But of him’ for efficiently, ‘by him,’ formally, ‘in him’ and that is that which is finally what it is). LW IV, *Sermo* XXV, Ernst Benz, Bruno Benz, Bruno Decker und Joseph Koch, Kohlhammer (Stuttgart, 1956).

Eckhart does not simply employ paradoxes, but he plays with sheer contradictions, to sharpen images, in order to express a content that cannot be expressed by pure logical arguments. Perhaps, it has to do with the realization that Love cannot be expressed in language alone, but that it needs acting out; and, that because love metaphors are alive, they take the listener and hearer into a world that is not only erotic, but also spirituality transcendent.

Although Eckhart's sexual language is very stylised, poeticised and romanticised, it now passes from a merely physical palpable language to one that is spiritualised, mysticised and apotheosised; and as such, Eckhart's sexual language becomes transcendentally surreal, pregnant with divine desires, expectations, actualisations and potentialities.

The quantum of sexual imageries in Eckhart is greater than the sum total of all individual sexual and erotic actions and longings taken together; these imageries become cosmically and universally the repository of the collective human consciousness, that is, Being, Existence, Life, Living and Loving. Such sexual imageries of Eckhart's are no longer tainted, and have never been tainted with any Manichean or other metaphysical or theological notions of guilt, original sin, lust, and concupiscence.

In Eckhart's theological schematics any such notions of human inadequacies or human failures are turned upside-down, and his sexual imageries become reflective of the *spiritalis-amplex* ideal characterised by the expression *unio mystica*: this is an experience that Eckhart is fond of calling, *The Birth of the Son in the Soul*. It is this iconic sexual expression that is a representation of Eckhart's sensuality, which encapsulates, infuses, and suffuses much of his theology.

Obviously, one could have approached this thesis from another perspective – in fact, from several other perspectives, but of course, time and space would not have permitted me to do that. But one of the perspectives from which I could have approached Eckhart's sexual imageries – different from the somatic, psychological and physiological angle of Eckhart's imaginary language taken in this study – is a systematic-metaphysical, or a philosophico-theological one to show Eckhart's ontology referred to as the *Birth of the Son in the Soul*.

For instance, if approaching Eckhart's sexual theology from this route, I could have drawn more attention to some of the theological and metaphysical influences that bore on Eckhart. For a general survey of the academic and scholarly literature which deals with Christian theological and religious discourse shows that Eckhart was influenced by the likes of Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero,<sup>492</sup> St. Paul, St. John the Evangelist,<sup>493</sup> Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Avicenna, Averroes, Plotinus and Proclus, and the neo-Platonic school in general; plus, the Church Fathers, e.g. Origen, Scholastic theologians, e.g. St. Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Maimonides,<sup>494</sup> Albert the Great, Dietrich of Freiberg<sup>495</sup>, Peter Lombard,<sup>496</sup> the Beguines, Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg,<sup>497</sup> Hugh of St. Victor and countless other scholars and sources, including non-Western sources and influences.<sup>498</sup>

Meister Eckhart standing on the shoulders of those intellectual giants in the *soul arena* who went before him, shared some of their perspectives about the soul; for instance, its divine origin, its immortality, its higher powers like intellect, reason and so on; plus, a recognition of the soul's lower powers locatable in the five senses. But although he seems at times to think that the person is dualistic – that body and soul are in conflict – he resolves this dichotomy by recognising that the soul and the body work together as co-partners or co-dependents.

But where the Meister is different from his predecessors in respect of the soul is that not only is the soul divine, but that this divinity of the soul gives it creative, fertile, regenerative, autonomous and productive powers to also create and recreate the divine. That the soul, indeed, has movement and gives motion, but this movement is not only

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<sup>492</sup> For example, see C.F. Kelley, *Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (1977), 27-29, in a discussion about the Intellectual Influences on Eckhart, lists some of the many influences on Eckhart, including Greek, Stoic, Latin, Christian, Muslim and Jewish scholars. He names people like Origen, Chrysostom, Boethius, John Damascus, Peter Lombard, St. Albert the Great, Hilary of Poitiers, Richard and Hugh of St Victor amongst many others who influenced Eckhart. Although among pagan philosophers, Aristotle seemed to have had the greatest influence on Eckhart, it was, however, Christian thinkers like St. Thomas, St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius who had greater influence on him.

<sup>493</sup> G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages, The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent*, c.1250 – c.1450 (1999).

<sup>494</sup> D. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, Denys Turner: 'Negativity in Christian Mysticism', Cambridge University Press, (1998).

<sup>495</sup> D.R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language* (xxx).

<sup>496</sup> John M. Jeep, *Beguines Medieval Germany* (2001).

<sup>497</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>498</sup> R.H. Jones, *Mysticism and morality: a new look at old questions* (2004).

physical or anthropological, but it is spiritual and sexual; for as an active or transformative agent, it is capable of not only regenerating and restoring itself, but creating, recreating, and regenerating the Divine.

Furthermore, and in terms of Christian theology with its doctrine or mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the soul in this arena is fruitful and productive, and is able, not only to accommodate the birth of the Son in the soul, but she is also able to become pregnant with the Son, and to become the mother and father of God, and according to Eckhart, for the soul to become God.

The word, soul is widely used in all manner of ways, but it is a very nebulous term. Many diverse theories, formulations and speculations – philosophical, religious, poetic – abound about the soul, as to what is its true nature; even, as to whether it exists or not. For after all, it is not something that is visible or tangible.

For instance, Aristotle has a wide range of meanings for the soul (*psyche*) that are ontologically and philosophically expressed in terms of substance (*ousia*), form (*eidos*), matter (*hyle*), actuality (*entelecheia*), capacity (*dunamis*), etc. For Aristotle, the soul is not separate from the body neither is the body separate from the soul, for Aristotle noted this in *De anima*:

It is quite clear then that the soul is not separate from the body, or that some parts of it are not, if it is its nature to have parts. For with some of the parts of the soul the actuality is of bodily parts themselves. (1.1.413a ff. 159)

Furthermore, the soul is to be body like sight to the eye. If sight left the eye, then the eye would be useless except in name only. Similarly if the soul – the animating principle of the body – were to leave it – the body would just be an empty husk. So the soul is a bundle of capabilities, but also the soul – at least parts of it in Aristotle – needs its body, especially the affected part of the soul or the intellect, this part which is coming-into being-and-going-out-of being. For Aristotle, it is this contingent and thus separate part that is perishable; but, the intellective part is eternal. He adds:

It is further in its separate state that the intellect is just that which it is, and it is this alone that is immortal and eternal, though we have no memory, as the separate intellect is unaffected, while the intellect that is affected is perishable, and in any case thinks nothing without the other. (*De Anima* 111.5, 205)

Yet, in this discussion we have not taken a demonstrable philosophico-theological approach in discussing Eckhart's sexual language, although here and there we have to some degree touched on the philosophical side of his language. But essentially Eckhart cuts-to-the-chase and does not treat the soul in Aristotelian terms; but, instead reconfigures the soul not only in terms of scholastic theology. He also becomes creative and works up the heat of language to create excitement in the hearts of his listeners towards his homilies. We have allowed Eckhart to charm us and to become magnetised by his alluring sexual imageries.

Eckhart can of course accept the formulations of the soul in the rather rationalistic terms as conceived by Aristotle, but he departs from his strict rationalistic definition of the soul. The soul for Eckhart, despite all its technical descriptions which Eckhart knows from the tradition,<sup>499</sup> is not simply equated with the intellect in opposition to the body, because Eckhart is less concerned as to whether the soul is unmoved, or moves itself, or whether it is moved by the Unmoved Mover; or whether the soul exists in the body or is a part of the body; whether it is perishable or immortal and so forth.

The various dualistic, and the many other schematic vagaries of the soul take second place for Eckhart to the efficacy of grace in the soul; and, because he gets back to basics wielding as it were his *Occam-like* razor of precision, in *Sermon10*<sup>500</sup> for instance, he reveals the nature of the soul in a language that goes beyond the metaphysically abstract. Now, in his role as lecturer or preacher, he utters emphatic statements because he is no longer an outsider, but has become an insider of the truth, a truth that speaks through him; and, where the 'I' of Eckhart becomes the 'it' of the truth:

*It is true:* The closeness of God and the soul admits no difference. The same knowledge in which God knows himself is the knowledge of every detached spirit and nothing else. The soul receives its being immediately from God. For this reason God is near to the soul than it is to itself, and God is in the ground of the soul with all his divinity.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> *De Anima* 11.2.413bff., transl. Hugh Lawson-Tamcred, Penguin (1986), 160.

<sup>500</sup> DW I Pr.10, J. Quint, Kohlhammer (1958-1986), 467/8-13.

<sup>501</sup> Transl. F. Tobin and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (1987), 261.

Eckhart has emphatically engaged us by his sexual language and we have accepted his invitation for dialogue, and now we aim for what he was aiming for; that is, for the soul to have a reciprocal and dynamic relationship with the divine, instead of taking his language as abstruse metaphysical theorems. Because with Eckhart, language about the union between the soul and divine blends contemplation or reflection with action so as to engage, leverage, and energise the cosmos. It also transpires that the soul is an eternal anthropological, theological and cosmological *being qua being*.

Anthropologically, as humans, already possessed by God, progress by virtuous steps towards their own summit which is God; and, as they positively interact with other humans along the stages towards divine union, the soul can only but intensify its union with God. Theologically, the soul's natural resting place is in God where it interacts and participates in the life of the Trinity. Such enjoyment in the divine sweetness can hardly be taken in an abstract form; and, so the taste for God must be enjoyed by imbibing Him, and this is done directly or even obliquely in every sentence, in every homily, through implicit and explicit sexual imageries that Eckhart paints.

Again and again, however, language itself in Eckhart is a reflection of God's refulgent and resplendent glory that is mirroring God back to Himself. Such is the grandeur of language for Eckhart, the highlighting of which, therefore, does not replace a philosophical or theological approach, but complements it by magnifying what was more than a tool for Eckhart.

Remarkably, Eckhart uses sexualised language which although *metaphoricised* and *spiritualised*, speaks about the unity of all creation. But his usage of sexual imageries, function as metaphors to reveal the actual and latent sexual energies that underlie or drive all life; and, at the same time, Eckhart uses these sexual imageries to allow us to enter the mind of divinity. In fact, at the root of *being*, is sexuality, both God and our's, not narrowly construed as mere erotic desires for actual physical and sexual pleasures, but understood in a wider sense as a way that all humans experience the world, for afterall, all humans – all living things in fact, to a greater or lesser extent – are not robotic and passive creatures, but are also co-creators in God's cosmos.

Eckhart divorces the Christian doctrines from its neo-Platonic antecedents by employing in his homilies, a wide range of code-words or phrases for sexuality, like

*beginning, creation, procreation, seed, fruit, growth, birth, fountain, spring, green, life, father, son, paternity, sonship, Spirit, spiritness, wife, virgin, love, revelation, relation, relationship, grace, salvation, detachment, oneness, unity, truth, virtue, intellect, will, bliss, joy, fruits, blossoms* and so forth; that, he leaves us in no doubt as to what he means. Mind you, many others have used such same terms, but used them *denotationally* like dictionary words. However, Eckhart uses these same words *connotationally* but with vivid sexual references.

In addition, we find that Eckhart's theological and metaphysical language, through and through are impregnated with erotic imageries and sexually-loaded words and phrases, as shown, for instance, in *On the Nobleman*.<sup>502</sup> However, because Eckhart's sexual allusions are misunderstood or because they were not fully appreciated for what they are – i.e. erotic talk – we chose to undertake this study in order to crack the Eckhartian sexual *enigma* code, knowing that we had to leave aside other core elements of his rich works.

At least, we hope to have been able to encrypt some of his words and images, so that we are no longer in doubt as to what he was talking about. One could reflect or speculate of course, on how and why this Dominican was so thoroughly steeped in, and dependent on this type of sublimated amorous language that has shaped his theological lexicography. Yet, we have shown that it was not simply the Bible, the Cistercian tradition or courtly love metaphors that found their way into his thinking and writing.

We hope to have shown that it was his theological reflection about the divine's nature itself that provided the code to decipher the *enigma*. Eckhart's sexual imageries and language are hardly understood, if we stop just at a psychological assessment of them; but, they lead further, and they unravel theology itself as sexually creative and as eminently and immanently divine.

Eckhart, unlike so many other theologians before and after him in the Christian traditions; and, unlike many other religious teachers of other belief-systems, does not have a static theogony – with notions of the impassibility, immovability, inapproachability of the *One*. But in contrast, Eckhart shows that we humans, or at any rate, the soul, by having a loving, active, creative, fertile, procreative relationship with

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<sup>502</sup>A detailed study of the *Nobleman* was undertaken in Chapter Four.

the Divine obtain the same transformative experience, called *geburt* (birth), that God himself enjoys. This process of Geburt – the act of begetting, conceiving, germinating, interpenetrating – is a two-way process which occurs between God and the soul. ‘Geburt’ is so transformative and revolutionary that it leads to the divinisation of man, and also leads to the *homofication* of God. This is simultaneously the acts of *Creation*, *Incarnation* and the *Birth of the Son in the Soul*.

Within the Eckhartian ontological and epistemological system, the soul, by virtue not only of its divine attributes – goodness, love, grace, friendship, relationship – but even more so by its ontological kernel or essential property is not different from its source or origin – the *One*. This is due to the fact of unity or self-sameness of the Image of God or *Intellect* with the soul. This unity is analogous to the fruit and its seed: that is to say, that in order for the fruit *to be*, it already possesses the seed within itself; and the same principle is true for the seed; it has to be one within the fruit.

So it is with God and the soul; they simultaneously pre-exist and co-exist. And yet, despite their sameness, Eckhart has not developed a pantheistic theology either, nor has he developed a theology of asceticism for God. Instead, God’s *distinction* in his *indistinction*, and his monism are best expressed in the sexual intimacy between sexual partners who become one body. God’s union therefore with his creatures is simultaneously oneness and difference, pleasure and pain, life and death, beginning and end; but, they are not binary opposites but unified wholes.

In this self-sameness there is spontaneous, contiguous and continuous growth – that is the essential nature of existence – and this growth of God’s seed in the soul then leads towards full maturation or spiritual development, a *union*, which is being achieved, and always being renewed. This union is nurtured by an effective and efficacious engagement in religious and Christian disciplines and practices – rites, rituals, duties and obligations such as baptism and the Eucharist; where *piety* is only possible when contemplation takes second place to action. In other words ‘faith without works is dead’.

Pre-eminently however for Eckhart, union with God can only be fully achieved when there is total *detachment* and surrender to the will of God. This surrender means that God’s seed – or the Image of God – is best fed and watered when the soul practises



good works and utters good words; but, works and words are only *good* when working and goodness are accompanied without a ‘Why’. Loving words are only lovable, loving, and loved when they are motivated by justice for justice’s sake only. This then is the language as narrated by Eckhart: it is a creative or regenerative script that unfolds the homo-divinus drama of *Being qua Being*, a narrative that is forever being spoken.

Eckhart’s *homo-divinus* paradigm has vital implications for man, and as such, Eckhart’s considerations are not just mere empty philosophical, rhetorical, and metaphysical theorisation of a muddle-headed theologian or some *mystic*; but, his theology has far-reaching consequences for humanity, because it is uplifting. His theology reintegrates *Adam* and *Eve* (i.e. God and the Soul) back to their pristine status – their divine status. His theology also divests God of neo-Platonic impotence, and makes God, *God* again with man riding as his partner alongside Him.

Eckhart’s sexual theology re-clothes, and ennoble men and women, making them active and dynamic players in the *Now-of-Eternity*. Eckhart’s theology is sociologically, psychologically, anthropologically, and cosmologically limitless, for it elevates *man* to the divine sphere, and at the same time brings God back into the human arena, i.e., God becomes demystified, de-mythologised, humanised, and now one with man. That is to say, theology reaches down to man, and *homology* or to be more precise, anthropology reaches up to God. All this of course is accomplished in a cosmic sexual act of *Geburt* – the equivalent of the *Big Bang* phenomenon in astrophysics.

We hope therefore that this study was able to throw some light on this erotic side of Meister Eckhart which having been intimated by others, however has not been yet been fully explored and discussed by them. Given then, that Eckhart’s work is so broad and so rich as to be justly developed in this limited treatise; and, although, we have started this journey to uncover something of the spirit that drove Eckhart, we hope that subsequent scholars will run with this topic a little further and treat it with greater intellectual and academic rigour that it deserves.

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